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B E S S Y R A N E

A Novel

BY

MRS. HENRY WOOD,

AUTHOR OF

“EAST LYNNE,” “THE CHANNINGS,” “ROLAND YORKE,”
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



L O N D O N :

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

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RESERVE

BESSY RANE.

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

THE ANONYMOUS LETTER.

IT was an intensely dark night. What with the mist that hung around from below, and the unusual gloom above, Dr. Rane began to think he might have done well to bring a lantern with him, as a guide to his steps up Ham Lane, when he should turn into it. He would not be able to spare time to pick his way there. A gentleman—so news had been brought to him—was lying in sudden extremity, and his services as a medical man were being waited for.

Straight along on the road before him at only half a mile's distance lay the village of Dallory; so called after the Dallory family,

who had been of importance in the neighbourhood in the years gone by. This little off-shoot of it was styled Dallory Ham. The latter name gave rise to disputes amidst antiquarians. Some of them maintained that the word Ham was but a contraction of hamlet, and that the correct name of the place would be Dallory Hamlet; others asserted that the appellation arose from the circumstance that the public green, or common, was in the shape of a ham. As both sides brought logic and proof irresistible to bear on their respective opinions, contention never flagged. At no remote period the Ham had been a wild grassy waste, given over to stray donkeys, geese, and gipsies. They were done away with, now that houses encircled it: pretty villas of moderate dimensions, some cottages and a few shops: the high road ran, as it always had done, straight through the middle of it. Dallory Ham had grown to think itself of importance, especially since the time when two doctors had established themselves in it; Dr. Rane and Mr. Alexander. Both of them lived in what might be called the neck of the Ham, which was nearest to Dallory proper.

Standing with your face towards Dallory (in the direction the doctor was now running) his house was on the right-hand side. He had but now turned out of it. Dallory Hall, to which place Dr. Rane had been summoned, stood a little beyond the entrance to the Ham, lying back on the right amidst its grounds, and completely hidden by trees. It was inhabited by Mr. North.

Oliver Rane had come forth in great haste and commotion. He could not understand the message—except the one broad fact that Edmund North, Mr. North's eldest son, was supposed to be dying. The servant, who brought it, did not seem to understand it either. He spoke of an anonymous letter that had been received by Mr. North, of disturbance and commotion thereupon, of a subsequent encounter (a sharp, brief quarrel) between Edmund North and Mr. Alexander the surgeon; and of a sort of fit in which Edmund North was now lying senseless.

Dr. Rane was a gentlemanly man of middle height and slender frame, his age about thirty. The face in its small regular features might have been held to possess a dash of effeminacy, but for the resolute character of

the firm mouth and the pointed chin. His eyes—rather too close together—whiskers and hair were of a reddish brown, the latter worn brushed aside from the forehead ; his teeth were white and even. Altogether a good-looking man ; but one of rather too silent manners, of too inscrutable a countenance to be very pleasing.

“An anonymous letter!” Dr. Rane had repeated to himself with a kind of groan, as he flew from his house like one greatly startled, and pursued his course down the Ham. Glancing across at Mr. Alexander’s house opposite, he felt a momentary temptation to go over and learn particulars—if haply the surgeon should be at home. The messenger had said that Mr. Alexander flung out of Dallory Hall in a passion, right in the midst of the quarrel : hence the summons for Dr. Rane. For Mr. Alexander, not Dr. Rane, was the Hall’s medical attendant : this was the first time the latter had been called upon to act as such.

They had come to Dallory within a day of each other, these two doctors, in consequence of the sudden death of its old practitioner, each hoping to secure the practice for himself.

It was Mr. Alexander who chiefly gained it. Both were clever men: and it might have been at least an even race between them, but for the fact that Mrs. North of Dallory Hall set her face resolutely against Dr. Rane. The reason was inexplicable; since he had been led to believe that he should have the countenance of Mr. and Mrs. North. She did her best in a covert way to prevent his obtaining practice, pushing his rival—whom she really despised and did not care a tittle for—into favour. Her object might not be to drive Oliver Rane from the spot, but it certainly seemed to look like it. So Mr. Alexander had obtained the lion's share of the practice in the best families; Dr. Rane but little: as to the poor, they were divided between them pretty equally. Both acted as general practitioners, and Mr. Alexander dispensed his own medicines. The rivals were outwardly cordial with each other; but Dr. Rane, no doubt, felt an inward smart.

The temptation—to dash over to Mr. Alexander's—passed with the thought: there was no time for it. Dr. Rane pursued his course until he came to an opening on the right, Ham Lane, into which he turned, for it was a

near way to the Hall. A narrow lane, green and lovely in early summer, with wild flowers nestling on its banks, dog-roses and honeysuckles clustering in its hedges. Here was the need of the lantern. But Dr. Rane sped on without regard to inadvertent sideward steps, that might land him in the ditch. Some excitement appeared to be upon him, far beyond any that might arise from the simple fact of being called out to a gentleman in a fit : yet he was by temperament entirely self-possessed ; one of the calmest-mannered men living. A stile in the hedge on the left, which he found as if by instinct, took him at once into the grounds of Dallory Hall; whence there came wafting to him the scent of hyacinths, daffodils, and other spring flowers, in delicious sweetness, spite of the density of the night air. Not that Dr. Rane derived much advantage from the benefit : nothing could seem delicious to him just then.

It was more open here, as compared with the lane, and not so intensely dark. Three minutes of the same heedless pace in and out amidst the winding walks, when he turned a point at right angles, and the old stone mansion was before him. A long, grey, sensible-

looking house, of only two storeys high, imparting the notion of spacious rooms within. Lights shone from some of the windows and through the fan-light over the entrance door. One of the gardeners crossed Dr. Rane's path.

"Is that you, Williams? Do you know how young Mr. North is?"

"I've not been told, sir. There's something wrong with him, we hear."

"Is this blight?" called back the doctor, alluding to the curiously dark mist.

"Not it, sir. It's nothing but the vapour arising from the day's heat. It *have* been hot, for the first day o' May."

The door yielded to Dr. Rane's hand, and he went into the hall: it was of middling size, and paved with stone. On the left were the drawing-rooms; on the right the dining-room, and also a room that was called Mr. North's parlour; a handsome staircase of stone wound up at the back. All the doors were closed; and as Dr. Rane stood for a moment in hesitation, a young lady in grey silk came swiftly and silently down the stairs. Her figure was small and slight; her face fair, pale, gentle, with the meekest look in

her dove-like grey eyes. Her smooth, fine hair, of an exceedingly light brown, was worn in curls all round the head, after the manner of girls in a bygone time. It made her look very young ; but she was, in reality, thirty years of age ; three months younger than Dr. Rane. Miss North was very simple in tastes and habits, and adhered to many customs of her girlhood. Moreover, since an illness seven years ago, the hair had never grown very long or thick. She saw Dr. Rane, and came swiftly to him. Their hands met in silence.

“ What is this trouble, Bessy ? ”

“ Oh, I am so glad you are here ! ” she exclaimed, in the soft, subdued tone characteristic of dangerous sickness in a house. “ He is lying as though he were dead. Papa is with him. Will you come ? ”

“ One moment,” he whispered. “ Tell me, in a word, what it all is ? The cause, I mean, not the illness.”

“ It was caused by an anonymous letter to papa. Edmund—— ”

“ But how could any anonymous letter to your papa have caused illness to Edmund ? ” he interrupted. And the tone of his voice

was so sharp, and the dropping of her hand, clasped until then, so sudden, that Miss North, in her self-deprecation, thought he was angry with her, and glanced upwards through her tears.

“I beg your pardon, Bessy. My dear, I feel so grieved and confounded at this, that I am scarcely myself. It is to me utterly incomprehensible. What were the contents of the letter?” he continued, as they hastened upstairs to the sick chamber. And Bessy North told him in a whisper as much as she knew.

The facts of the case were these. By the six o’clock post that same evening, Mr. North received an anonymous letter, reflecting on his son Edmund.—His first wife, dead now just eight-and-twenty years, had left him three children, Edmund, Richard, and Bessy.—When the letter arrived, the family had sat down to dinner, and Mr. North did not open it until afterwards. He showed it to his son, Edmund, as soon as they were left alone. The charges it contained were true, and Edmund North jumped to the conclusion that only one man in the whole world could have written it, and that was Alexander, the

surgeon. He went into a frightful passion ; he was given to do so on occasion ; and he had, besides, taken rather more wine at dinner than was good for him—which also he was somewhat addicted to. As ill fate had it, Mr. Alexander called just at the moment, and Mr. North, a timid man in nervous health, grew frightened at the commencing torrent of angry words, and left them together in the dining-room. There was a short, sharp storm. Mr. Alexander came out almost immediately, saying, “ You are mad ; you are mad. I will talk to you when you are calmer.” “ I would rather be mad than bad,” shouted Edmund North, coming after him. But the surgeon had already let himself out at the hall-door ; and Edmund North went back to the dining-room, and shut himself in. Two of the servants, attracted by the sounds of dispute, had been lingering in the hall, and they saw and heard this. In a few minutes, Mr. North went in, and found his son lying on the ground, senseless. He was carried to his chamber, and medical men were sent for: Dr. Rane (as being the nearest), and two physicians from the more distant market-town, Whitborough.

Edmund North was not dead. Dr. Rane, bending over him, saw that. He had not been well of late, and was under the care of Mr. Alexander. Only a week ago (as was to transpire later) he had gone to consult a physician in Whitborough, one of those now summoned to him. This gentleman suspected he had heart-disease, and warned him against excitement. But the family knew nothing as yet of this; neither did Oliver Rane. Another circumstance Edmund North had not disclosed. When sojourning in London the previous winter, he had been attacked by a sort of fit. It had looked like apoplexy, more than heart; and the doctors gave him sundry injunctions to be careful. This one also, Dr. Rane thought, knowing nothing of the former, looked like apoplexy. Edmund North was a very handsome man, but a great deal too stout.

“Is he dead, Oliver?” asked the grieving father; who when alone with the doctor, and unshackled by the presence of his wife, often called him by his Christian name.

“No; he is not dead.”

And indeed a spasm just at that same moment passed over the prostrate face. All

the means that Oliver Rane could think of, and use, he tried with his best heart and efforts—hoping to recall the fast-fleeting life.

But when the two doctors arrived from Whitborough, Oliver Rane found he was not wanted. They were professionals of long-standing, men of note in their local arena; and showed themselves blandly cool, condescendingly patronising to the young practitioner. Dr. Rane had rather a strong objection to be patronised: he withdrew, and went to Mr. North's parlour. It was a dingy room; the shaded lamp on the table not sufficing to light it up. Red moreen curtains were drawn before the large French window, that opened to the side flower garden.

Mr. North was standing before the fire. He was a little shrivelled man with stooping shoulders, his scanty hair smoothed across a low broad forehead, his lips thin and querulous; his eyes, worn and weary now, had once been mild and loving as his daughter Bessy's. Time, and care, and (as some people said) his second wife, had changed him. Oliver Rane thought he had never seen him look so shrunken, nervous, and timid as to-night.

"What a grievous pity it was that you should have mentioned the letter to him, Mr. North!" began the doctor, speaking at once of what lay uppermost in his thoughts.

"Mentioned the letter to him!—why, it concerned him," was the surprised answer. "But I never cast a thought to its having this kind of effect upon him."

"What was in the letter, sir?" was the doctor's next question, put with considerable gloom, and after a long silence.

"You can read it, Oliver."

Opening the document, he handed it to Dr. Rane. It looked like any ordinary letter. The doctor took it to the lamp.

"MR. NORTH,—Pardon a friend who ventures to give you a caution. Your eldest son is in some kind of embarrassment, and is drawing bills in conjunction with Alexander, the surgeon. Perhaps a word from you would arrest this: it is too frequently the first step of a man's downward career—and the writer would not like to see Edmund North enter on such."

Thus, abruptly and signatureless, ended

the fatal letter. Dr. Rane slowly folded it, and left it on the table.

"Who could have written it?" he murmured.

"Ah, there it is!" rejoined Mr. North. "Edmund said no one could have done it but Alexander."

Standing over the fire, to which he had turned, Dr. Rane warmed his hands. The intensely hot day had given place to a cold night. His red-brown eyes took a dreamy gaze, as he revolved facts and suppositions. In his private opinion, judging only from the contents of the letter, Mr. Alexander was about the last man who could have been likely to write it.

"It is not like Alexander's writing," observed Mr. North.

"Not in the least."

"But of course this is in a thoroughly disguised hand."

"Most anonymous letters are so, I expect. Is it true that he and your son have been drawing bills together?"

"I gather that they have drawn one; perhaps two. Edmund's passion was so fierce that I could not question him. What I don't

like is, Alexander's going off in the manner he did, without seeing me : it makes me think that perhaps he did write the letter. An innocent man would have remained to defend himself. It might have been written from a good motive, after all, Oliver ! My poor son !—if he had but taken it peaceably!"

Mr. North wrung his hands. His tones were feeble, meekly complaining ; his manner and bearing were altogether those of a man who has been perpetually put down and no longer attempts to struggle against the cares and crosses of the world, or the will of those about him.

"I must be going," said Oliver Rane, arousing himself from a reverie. "I have to see a poor man at Dallory."

"Is it Ketler?"

"Yes, sir. Good night. I trust you will have cause to be in better spirits in the morning."

"Good night, Oliver."

But the doctor could not get off at once. He was waylaid by a servant, who said Madam wished to see him. Crossing the hall, the man threw open the doors of the drawing-

room, a magnificent apartment. Gilded and gleaming mirrors ; light blue satin curtains and furniture ; a carpet softer and thicker than moss : and all kinds of bright and resplendent things were there.

“ Dr. Rane, madam.”

Mrs. North sat on a couch by the fire. In the house she was called Madam—out of the house, too, for the matter of that. A severely handsome woman, with a cold, pale, imperious face, the glittering jewels in her black hair looking as hard as she did. A *cruel* face, as some might have deemed it. When Mr. North married her, she was the widow of Major Bohun, and had one son. Underneath the chandelier, reading by its light, sat her daughter, a young lady whose face bore a strong resemblance to hers. This daughter and a son had been born since her second marriage.

“ You wished to see me, Mrs. North ?”

Dr. Rane so spoke because they took no manner of notice of him. Mrs. North turned then, with her dark, inscrutable eyes ; eyes that Oliver Rane hated, as he hated the cruelty glittering in their depths. He believed her to be a woman unscrupulously selfish. She

did not rise; merely motioned him to a seat opposite with a haughty wave of her white arm: and the bracelets shone on it, and her ruby velvet dress gleamed with amazing richness. He sat down with entire self-possession, every whit as independent as herself.

“ You have seen this infamous letter, I presume, Dr. Rane ?”

“ I have.”

“ Who sent it ?”

“ I cannot tell you, Mrs. North.”

“ Have you no idea at all ?”

“ Certainly not. How should I have ?”

“ Could you detect no resemblance in the writing to any one’s you know ?”

He shook his head.

“ Not to—for instance—Alexander’s ?” she resumed, making the pauses as put, and looking at him steadfastly. But Dr. Rane saw with a sure instinct that Alexander’s was not the name she had meant to speak.

“ I feel sure that Mr. Alexander no more wrote the letter than—than you did, Mrs. North.”

“ Does it bear any resemblance to Richard North’s ?” she continued, after a faint pause.

"To Richard North's!" echoed the doctor, the words taking him by surprise. "No."

"Are you familiar with Richard North's handwriting?"

Oliver Rane paused to think, and then replied with a passing laugh, "I really believe I do not know his handwriting, madam."

"Then why did you speak so confidently?"

"I spoke in the impulse of the moment. Richard North, of all men, is the least likely to do such a thing as this."

The young lady, Matilda North, turned round from her book. An opera cloak of scarlet gauze was on her shoulders, as if she were cold; she pulled it closer with an impatient hand.

"Mamma, why do you harp upon Richard? He *couldn't* do it; papa told you so. If Dick saw cause to find fault with anybody, or tell tales, he would do it openly."

One angry gleam from Madam's eyes as her daughter settled to her book again, and then she proceeded to close the interview.

"As you profess yourself unable to give me information or detect any clue, I will not detain you longer, Dr. Rane."

He stood for a second, expecting, perhaps,

she might offer her hand. She did nothing of the sort, only bowed coldly. Matilda North took no notice of him whatever: she was content to follow her mother's teachings when they did not clash with her own inclination. Dr. Rane had ceased to marvel why he was held in disfavour by Mrs. North: to try to guess at it seemed a hopeless task. Neither could he imagine why she opposed his marriage with Bessy; for to Bessy and her interests she was utterly indifferent.

As he left the drawing-room, Bessy North joined him, and they went together to the hall door. No servant had been rung for—it was one of Mrs. North's ways of showing contempt—and they stood together outside, speaking softly. Again the tears shone in Bessy's eyes: her heart was a very tender one, and she had loved her brother dearly.

“Oliver, is there any hope?”

“Do not distress yourself, Bessy—I cannot tell you, one way or the other.”

“How am I to help distressing myself?” she rejoined, her hand resting quietly in both of his. “It is all very well for you to be calm; a medical man meets these sad things every day. You cannot be expected to care.”

"Can I not?" he answered ; and there was a touch of passionate emotion in the usually calm tone. "If any effort or sacrifice of mine would bring back his health and life, I'd make it freely. Good night, Bessy."

As he stooped to kiss her, some quick firm footsteps were heard approaching, and Bessy went indoors. He who came up was a rather tall and very active man, with a plain, but nevertheless, an attractive face. Plain in its irregular features ; attractive from its open candour and strong good sense, from the earnest, truthful look in the deep-set hazel eyes. People were given to say that Richard North was the best man of business for miles round. It was so : and he was certainly, in mind, manners, and person, a gentleman.

"Is it you, Rane? What is all this trouble? I have been away for a few hours unfortunately. Mark Dawson met me just now with the news that my brother was dying."

The voice would have been pleasing to a degree if only from its tone of ready decision : but it was also musical as voices seldom are, clear and full of sincerity. From the voice alone, Richard North might have been trusted to his life's end. Dr. Rane gave a short sum-

mary of the illness and the state he was lying in.

"Dawson spoke of a letter that had excited him," said Richard.

"True; a letter to Mr. North."

"A dastardly, anonymous letter. Just so."

"An anonymous letter," repeated the doctor. "But the effect on your brother seems altogether disproportioned to the cause."

"Where is the letter? I cannot look upon Edmund until I have seen the letter."

Dr. Rane told him where the letter was, and went out. Richard North passed on to the parlour. Mr. North, sitting by the fire, had his face bent down in his two hands.

"Father, what is all this?"

"Oh, Dick, I am glad you are come!" and in the tone there sounded an intense relief, as if he who came brought back strength and hope. "I can't make top or tail of this; and I think he is dying."

"Who is with him?—Arthur?"

"No; Arthur has been out all day. The doctors are with him still."

"Let me see the letter."

Mr. North gave it him, reciting at the same time the chief incidents of the calamity in a

rambling sort of manner. Richard North read the letter twice : once hastily, to gather in the sense ; then attentively, giving to every word full consideration. His father watched him.

“It was not so much the letter itself that excited him, Richard, as the notion that Alexander wrote it.”

“Alexander did not write this,” decisively spoke Richard.

“You think not ?”

“Why of course he did not. It tells against himself as much as against Edmund.”

“Edmund said no one knew of the matter but Alexander, and therefore no one else could have written it. Besides, Dick, where is Alexander ? Why is he staying away ?”

“We shall hear soon, I dare say. I have faith in Alexander. Keep this letter jealously, father. It may have been right to give you the information it contains : I say nothing at present about that : but an anonymous writer is generally a scoundrel, deserving no quarter.”

“And none shall he get from me,” spoke Mr. North, emphatically. “It was posted at Whitborough, you see, Dick.”

“I see,” shortly answered Richard. He

threw his coat back as if he were too hot ; and moved to the door on his way to his brother's chamber.

Meanwhile Oliver Rane went down the avenue to the front entrance gates, and took the road to Dallory. He had to see a patient there ; a poor man who was lying in danger. *He* threw his coat back, in spite of the chill fog, and wiped his brow, and seemed altogether in a fume, as if the weather or his reflections were too hot for him.

“ What a fool ! what a fool ! ” murmured he, half aloud, apostrophising, doubtless, the writer of the anonymous letter. Or, it might be, the unfortunate young man who had allowed it to excite within him so fatal an amount of passion.

The road was smooth and broad ; a fine highway, well kept. For a short distance there were no houses, but they soon began. Dallory was a bustling village, poor and rich living in it. The North Works, as they were familiarly called, from the fact of Mr. North's being their chief proprietor, lay a little further on, and Dallory church beyond still. It was a straggling parish, make the best of it.

Amidst the first good houses that Dr. Rane

came to was one superior to the rest. A large, square, handsome dwelling, with a pillared portico nearly abutting on the village pathway, and a fine garden behind.

"I wonder how Mother Gass is to-night?" thought the doctor, arresting his steps. "I may as well ask."

His knock at the door was answered by the lady herself, whom he had styled so unceremoniously "Mother Gass." A stout, comfortable-looking dame, richly dressed, with a face as red as it was good-natured, and a curiously fine lace cap, standing on end with yellow ribbon. Mrs. Gass had neither birth nor breeding: she had made an advantageous match, as you will hear further on; she possessed many good qualities, and was popularly supposed to be rich enough to buy up the whole of Dallory Ham. Her late husband had been the uncle of Oliver Rane, but neither she nor Oliver presumed upon the relationship in their intercourse with each other. In fact they had never met until two years ago.

"I knew your knock, Dr. Rane, and came to the door myself. Step into the parlour. I want to speak to you."

The doctor did not want to go in by any

means, and felt caught. He said he had no time to stay ; had merely called, in passing, to ask how she was.

“ Well, I’m better this evening ; the swimming in the head’s less. You just come in, now. I say yes. I won’t keep you two minutes. Shut the door, girl, after Dr. Rane.”

This was to a smart housemaid, who had followed her mistress down the wide and handsome passage. Dr. Rane perforce stepped in, very unwillingly. He felt instinctively convinced that Mrs. Gass had heard of the calamity at the Hall and wished to question him. To avoid this he would have gone a mile any other way.

“ I want to get at the truth about Edmund North, doctor. One of the maids from the Hall called in just now and said he had been frightened into a fit through some letter ; and that you were fetched to him.”

“ Well, that is the truth,” said the doctor, accepting the situation.

“ My patience !” ejaculated Mrs. Gass. “ What was writ in the letter ? She said it was one of them enonymous things.”

“ So it was.”

“ Was it writ to himself ?”

“ No. To Mr. North.”

“ Well, now,”—dropping her voice,—“ was it about that young woman he got acquainted with? You know.”

“ No, no; nothing of that kind.” And Dr. Rane, as the shortest way of ending the matter, gave her the details.

“ There was not much in the letter,” he said, in a confidential tone. “ No harm would have come of it but for Edmund North’s frightful access of passion. If he dies, mind,”—the doctor added this in a dreamy tone, gazing out afar as if looking into the future—“ if he dies, it will not be the letter that has killed him, but his own want of self-control.”

“ Don’t you talk of dying, doctor. It’s to be hoped it won’t come to that.”

“ It is, indeed.”

“ And Mr. Richard was not at home, the girl said !”

“ Neither he nor Captain Bohun. Richard has just got in now.”

Mrs. Gass would fain have kept him longer, but he told her the sick man Ketler was waiting for him. This man was one of the North workmen, who had been terribly

injured in the arm ; Dr. Rane hoped to save both the arm and the life.

“That receipt for the rhubarb jam Mrs. Cumberland promised : is it ever coming ?” asked Mrs. Gass as Dr. Rane was quitting the room.

Turning back, he put his hat on the table and took out his pocket-book. Mrs. Cumberland had sent it at last. He selected the paper from amongst several others and handed it to her.

“I forgot to leave it when I was here this morning, Mrs. Gass. My mother gave it me yesterday.”

Between them they dropped the receipt. Both stooped for it, and their heads came together. There was a slight laugh ; in the midst of which the pocket-book fell on the carpet. Some papers fluttered out of it, which the doctor picked up and replaced.

“Have you got ‘em all, doctor ? How is the young lady’s cold ?”

“What young lady’s ?” he questioned.

“Miss Adair’s.”

“I did not know she had one.”

“Ah, them lovely girls with their bright faces never show their ailments ; and she is

lovely, if ever there was one lovely in this terrestial world. Good-night to you, doctor ; you're in a mortal hurry.”

He strode to the street-door and shut it after him with a bang. Mrs. Gass looked out of her parlour and saw the same smart maid hastening along the passage : a little too late.

“ Drat it, wench ! Is that the way you let gentlefolks show themselves out—scuttering to the door when they’ve got clean away from it. D’ye call that manners ?”

CHAPTER II.

ELLEN ADAIR.

THE day promised to be as warm as the preceding one. The night and morning mists were gone; the sun shone hot and bright. Summer seemed to have come in before its time.

Two white gothic villas stood side by side just within the neck of Dallory Ham, a few yards of garden and some clustering shrubs lying between them. They were built alike. The side windows, facing each other over this strip of ground, were large projecting bay-windows, and belonged to the dining-rooms. These houses were originally erected for two maiden sisters; hence their relationship (if such a term may be applied to dwellings) one with the other. A large and beautiful garden lay at the back, surrounding the two villas, only a slender wire fence, that a child might

have stepped over, dividing it. Entering the Ham from the direction of Dallory, these houses stood on the left ; in the first of them lived Mrs. Cumberland, the mother of Oliver Rane. She had been married twice, hence the difference in name. The second house was occupied by Dr. Rane. They lay back with a strip of grass before them, the entrance doors being level with the ground ; no steps.

Let us go into the doctor's : turning the handle of the door without ceremony, as Dr. Rane's more familiar patients do. The hall is small, narrowing off at the upper end to a passage, and lighted with stained glass. On the left of the entrance door is the consulting-room, not much bigger than a closet ; beyond it is the dining-room, a good spacious apartment, with its bay-window, already spoken of, looking to the other house. Opposite the dining-room across the passage, narrow here, is the white-flagged kitchen ; and the drawing-room lies in front, on the right of the entrance. Not being furnished, it is mostly kept shut up. A back-door opens to the garden.

Oliver Rane sat in his consulting-room ; the "*Whitborough Journal*," damp from the

press, in his hand. It was just twelve o'clock and he had to go out, but the newspaper was attracting him. By seven o'clock that morning he had been at the Hall, and learnt that there was no material change in the patient lying there: he had then gone on, early though it was, to see the man, Ketler. The journal gave the details of Mr. North's seizure with tolerable accuracy, and concluded its account in these words: "We have reason to know that a clue has been obtained to the anonymous writer."

"A clue to the writer!" repeated Dr. Rane, his eyes seeming to be glued to the words. "I wonder if it's true? No, no; it is not likely," came the quiet, contemptuous decision. "How should any clue—"

He stopped suddenly; rose from the chair, and stood erect and motionless, as if some thought had struck him. A fine man; almost as good-looking at a casual glance as another who was stepping in upon him. The front door had opened, and this one was slightly tapped at. Dr. Rane paused before he answered it, and a fierce look of inquiry, as if he did not care to be interrupted, shot out from his eyes.

“Come in.”

A tall, slender, and very handsome man, younger than Dr. Rane, opened the door by slow degrees. There was a peculiar cast of proud refinement on his fair features; a dreamy look in his dark blue eyes. An attractive face at all times and seasons, whose owner it was impossible to mistake for any but an upright, well-bred gentleman. It was Arthur Bohun; Captain Bohun, as he was very generally called. He was the only son of Mrs. North by her former marriage with Major Bohun, and of course the step-son of Mr. North.

“Any admittance, doctor?”

“Always admittance to you,” answered the doctor, who could be affable or not, as it suited his mood. “Why don’t you come in?”

He came in with his pleasant smile; a smile that hid the natural pride of the face. Oliver Rane put down the newspaper.

“Well, is there any change in Edmund North?”

“The very slightest in the world, the doctors think; and for the better,” replied Captain Bohun. “Dick told me. I have not

been in myself since early morning. I cannot bear to look on extreme suffering."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Dr. Rane's features at the avowal. He could understand a woman's disliking to look on suffering, but not a man's. And the one before him had been a soldier!

Captain Bohun sat down on an uncomfortable wooden stool as he spoke, gently pushing back the front of his light summer coat. He imparted the idea of never being put out over any earthly thing. The movement displayed his cool white waistcoat, across which fell a dainty gold chain with its hanging seal, transparent sapphire, of rare and costly beauty.

" You have begun summer early!" remarked the doctor, glancing at Captain Bohun's attire.

The clothes were of a delicate shade of grey; looking remarkably cool and nice in conjunction with the white waistcoat. Captain Bohun was always dressed well: it seemed a part and parcel of himself. To wear the rude and rough attire that some men affect now-a-days, would have been against his instincts.

"Don't sit on that stool of penitence : take the patient's chair," said the doctor, pointing to an elbow-chair opposite the window.

"But I am not a patient."

"No. Or you'd be at the opposition shop over the way."

Arthur Bohun laughed. "It was of the opposition shop I came to speak to you—if I came for anything in particular. Where's Alexander? Is he keeping out of the way; or is he really gone to London as people say?"

"I know nothing of him," returned Dr. Rane. "Look here—I was reading the account they give in the newspaper. Is this last hint true?"—holding out the journal—"that a clue has been obtained to the writer of the letter?"

Arthur Bohun ran his eyes over the sentence to which the doctor's finger pointed.

"No, this has no foundation," he promptly answered. "At least so far as the Hall is concerned. As yet we have not found any clue whatever."

"I thought so. These newsmongers put forth lies by the bushel. Just as we might, if we had to cater for an unsatiably curious public. But I fear I must be going out."

Arthur Bohun brought down the fore-legs of the stool, which he had kept on the tilt, rose, and said a word of apology for having detained him from his patients. His was essentially a courteous nature, sensitively regardful of other people's feelings; as men of great innate refinement are sure to be.

They went into the dining-room, Dr. Rane having left his hat there, and passed out together by the large bay-window. The doctor crossed at once to a door in the wall that bound the premises at the back, and made his exit to the lane beyond, leaving Arthur Bohun in the garden.

A garden that on a summer's day seemed as a very paradise. With its clustering shrubs, its overhanging trees, its leafy glades, its shrubberies, its miniature rocks, its sweet repose, its sweeter flowers. Seated in a remote part of that which belonged to Mrs. Cumberland, was one of the loveliest girls that eye had ever looked upon. She wore a morning dress of light-coloured muslin, with an edging of lace on her neck and wrists. Slight, gentle, charming, with a peculiar look of grace and refinement, a stranger would have been almost startled at her beauty. It was a delightful face;

the features clearly cut ; the complexion soft, pure, and delicate, paling and flushing with every emotion. In the dark brown eyes there was a singularly sweet expression ; the dark brown hair took a lustrously bright tinge in the sunlight.

A natural arbour of trees and branches had been formed overhead : she sat on the garden bench, behind a rustic table. Before her, at a short distance, a falling cascade trickled down the artificial rocks, and thence wound away, a tiny stream, amidst ferns, violets, primroses, and other wild plants. A plot of green grass, smooth and soft as the moss of the rocks, lay immediately at foot, and glimpses of statelier flowers were caught through the trees. Their rich perfume came wafting in a sudden breeze to the girl's senses, and she looked up gratefully from the work she was busy over ; some small matter of silken embroidery.

And now you could see the exceeding refinement and delicacy of the face, the pleasant expression of the soft bright eyes. A bird lodged itself on a branch close by, and began a song. Her lips parted with a smile of greeting. By way of rewarding it, off he

flew, dipped his beak into the running stream, and soared away out of her sight. As is the case sometimes in life.

On the table lay a handful of violets, picked short off at the blossoms. Almost unconsciously, as it seemed, her thoughts far away, she began toying with them, and fell insensibly into the French schoolgirls' play, telling off the flowers. "Est-ce qu'il m'aime?" was the first momentous question; and then began the pastime, a blossom being told off with every answer. "Oui. Non. Un peu. Beaucoup. Pas du tout. Passionnément." And so the round went on, and on again, until the last violet was reached. It came, as chance had it, with the last word, and she, in an access of rapture, her soft cheeks glowing, her sweet lips parting, caught up the flower and put it into her bosom.

"Il m'aime passionnément!"

Ah, foolish girl! The oracle seemed as true as if it had come direct from heaven. But can we not remember the ecstasy such necromancy once brought to us!

With her blushes deepening as she woke, starting, into reality; with a smile at her own folly; with a shrinking sense of maiden

shame for indulging in the pastime, she pushed the violets into a heap, threaded a needleful of green floss silk, and went on with her work soberly. A few minutes, and then either eye or ear was attracted by something ever so far off, and she sat quite still. Quite still outwardly; but oh! the sudden emotion that arose like a lightning flash within!—for she knew the footsteps. Every vein was tingling; every pulse was throbbing; the pink on her cheeks deepened to a very sea of crimson; the life-blood of her heart rushed wildly on, and she laid her hand upon her bosom to still it.

He was passing straight on from Dr. Rane's to the other house, when he caught a glimpse of her dress through the trees, and turned aside. Nothing could have been quieter or more undemonstrative than the meeting; and yet a shrewd observer, skilled in secrets, had not failed to read the history—that both alike loved. Captain Bohun went up, calm as befitted a well-bred man; shaking hands after the fashion of society, and apparently with as little interest: but on his face the flush also shone in all its tell-tale brightness; the hand that touched hers

thrilled almost to pain. She had risen to receive him : she was just as calm outwardly as he, but her senses were in one maze of wild confusion.

She began to go on with her work again in a sort of hurried, trembling fashion when he sat down. The day, for her, had turned to Eden ; the flowers were brighter, the song of the birds was sweeter, the trees were of a golden green, like unto emeralds ; all things seemed to discourse a sweet music.

True love—idealistic, passionate, pure love—is not fluent of speech, whatever the world may say, or poets teach. Dr. Rane and Miss North thought they loved each other : and so they did, after a sensible, sober, plain manner : they could have conversed with mutual fluency for ever and a day ; but their love was not *this* love. It is the custom of modern writers to ignore it : the prevailing fashion is to be matter-of-fact ; realistic ; people don't talk of love now and of course don't feel it : the capability of it has died out ; modes have changed. Ah me ! what a false age it is ! as if we could put off human nature as we do a garment !

Captain Bohun was the first to break the

silence. *She* had been content to live in it by his side for ever : it was more eloquent, too, than his words were.

“ What a fine day it is, Ellen !”

“ Yes. I think summer has come : we shall scarcely have it warmer than this in July. And oh, how lovely everything is !”

“ It was hot yesterday. I had a ride of ten miles between green hedges on which the May is beginning to blossom. Envious darkness had shut the world out before I got home.”

“ And I sat out here all the afternoon,” she answered—and perhaps she unconsciously spoke more in pursuance of the thought, that she had sat out, waiting and hoping for him, than to give the information. “ Where did you go, Arthur ?”

“ To Bretchley. Some of my old brother-officers are quartered there : and I spent the day with them. What’s that for ?”

He alluded to the piece of work. She smiled as she held it out in her right hand, on the third finger of which was a plain gold ring. A small piece of white canvas, with a pink rose and part of a green leaf already worked upon it in bright floss silk.

“ Guess.”

“ Nay, how can I ? For a doll’s cushion ?”

“ Oh Arthur !” came the laughing exclamation. “ If I tell you, you must keep counsel, mind that, for it is a secret, and I am working at it under difficulties, out of Mrs. Cumberland’s sight. Don’t you think I have done a great deal ? I only began it yesterday.”

“ Well, what’s it for ?” he asked, putting his hand underneath it as an excuse, perhaps, for touching the fingers it was in. “ A fire-screen for pretty faces ?”

The young lady shook her head. “ It is for a kettle-holder.”

“ A kettle-holder ! What a prosy ending !”

“ It is for Mrs. Cumberland’s invalid kettle that she keeps in her bedroom. The handle got hot a day or two ago, and she burnt her hand. I shall put it on some morning to surprise her.”

There ensued a pause of silence. Half their intercourse was made up of pauses : the eloquent language of true love. Captain Bohun, thinking how kindly natured was the girl by his side, played abstractedly with the heap of sweet blossoms lying on the table.

"What have you been doing with all these violets, Ellen?"

"Nothing," she replied; and down fell the scissors. But that she stooped at once, Captain Bohun might have seen the sudden flush on the delicate face, and wondered at it: a flush of remembrance. *Il m'aime passionnément.* Well, so he did.

"Please don't entangle my silk, Captain Bohun."

He laughed as he put down the skein, one of a bright gold colour. "Shall I help you to wind it, Ellen?"

"Thank you, but we don't wind floss silk. It would deaden its beauty. Arthur! do you know that the swallows have come?"

"The swallows have! Then this summer weather will stay with us, for those birds have a sure instinct. It is early for them to be here."

"I saw one this morning. It may be only an avant-courier, come to report on the weather to the rest."

She laughed slightly at her own words, and there ensued another pause. Captain Bohun broke it.

"What a shocking thing this is about Edmund North!"

"What is a shocking thing?" she asked with indifference, going on with her work as she spoke. Arthur Bohun, who was busy again with the pale blue violets, scarcely as blue as his own eyes, lifted his face and looked at her.

"I mean altogether. The illness; the letter; the grief at home. It is all shocking."

"Is Edmund North ill? I did not know it."

"Ellen!"

Living in the very atmosphere of the illness, amidst its sea of bustle, distress, and attendant facts, to Arthur Bohun it seemed almost an impossibility that she should be in ignorance of it.

"Why, what has Rane been about, not to tell you?"

"I don't know. What is the matter with Edmund North?"

Captain Bohun explained the illness and its cause. Her work dropped on her knee as she listened; her face grew pale with interest. She never once interrupted him; every sympathetic feeling within her was aroused to warm indignation.

"An anonymous letter!" she at length exclaimed. "That's worse than a stab."

"A fellow, writing one of malice, puts himself beyond the pale of decent society : shooting would be too good for him," quietly remarked Captain Bohun. "Here comes a summons for you, I expect, Ellen."

Even so. One of the maids approached, saying Mrs. Cumberland was downstairs : and so the interview was broken up. Captain Bohun would perforce have taken his departure, but Miss Adair invited him in—"to tell the sad story to Mrs. Cumberland." Only too glad was he of any plea that kept him by Ellen's side.

Putting her work away in her pocket, she took the arm that was held out, and they went wandering through the garden. Lingered by the cascade, dreaming in the dark cypress walk, standing over the beds of beautiful flowers. A seductive time ; life's gala summer ; but a time that never stays, for the biting frosts of winter and reality succeed it surely and swiftly.

Nothing had been said between them, but each was conscious of what the other felt. Neither had whispered in so many words, "I love you." Ellen did not hint that she had watched for him the whole of the past live-

long day with love's sick longing ; he did not confess how lost the day had been to him, how worse than weary, because it did not give him a sight of her. These avowals might come in time, but they would not be needed.

Stepping in through the middle doors of the bay-window, as Arthur Bohun had made his exit from the opposite one, they looked round for Mrs. Cumberland, and did not see her. She was in the drawing-room on the other side the small hall, sitting near the Gothic windows that faced the road. A pale, reticent, lady-like woman, always suffering, but making more of her sufferings than she need have done—as her son, Dr. Rane, not over-dutifully thought. Her eyes were light and cold ; her flaxen hair, banded smoothly under a cap, was turning grey. But that Mrs. Cumberland was entirely occupied with self, and but little with her ward, Ellen Adair, she might have noticed before now the suggestive intimacy between that young lady and Arthur Bohun.

“ Captain Bohun is here, Mrs. Cumberland,” said Ellen, when they entered. “ He has some very sad news to tell you.”

“ And the extraordinary part of the busi-

ness is, that you should not have heard it before," added Arthur, as he shook hands with Mrs. Cumberland.

Mrs. Cumberland's rich black silk gown rustled a very little as she responded to the greeting ; but there was no smile on her grey face, her cold eyes wore no brighter light. In her way, she was glad to see him : that is, she had no objection to see him ; but gladness and Mrs. Cumberland seemed to have parted company. The suffering that arises from chronic pain makes a selfish nature doubly selfish.

"What is the news that Ellen speaks of, Captain Bohun?"

He stood leaning against the mantel-piece as he told the tale. Told it systematically ; the first advent of the anonymous letter to Mr. North ; the angry, passionate spirit in which Edmund North had taken it up ; his stormy interview with the surgeon, Alexander ; the subsequent attack, and the hopelessness in which he was lying. For once, Mrs. Cumberland was aroused to feel sympathy in another's sufferings ; she listened with painful interest.

"And it was *Oliver* who was called in first

to Edmund North!" she presently exclaimed, with enquiring emphasis, as if unable to credit the fact.

"Yes."

"But how was it he did not step in here afterwards to tell me the news?" added she, resentfully.

Captain Bohun could not answer that so readily. Ellen Adair, ever ready to find a charitable excuse for the world, turned to Mrs. Cumberland.

"Dr. Rane may have had to see patients. Perhaps he did not get home until too late to come here."

"Yes, he did; I saw his lamp burning before ten o'clock," was Mrs. Cumberland's answer. "Ah! this is another proof that I am being forgotten," she went on, bitterly. "When a woman has seen fifty years of life, she is old in the sight of her children, and they go then their own way in the world, leaving her to neglect."

"But, dear Mrs. Cumberland, Dr. Rane does not neglect you," said Ellen, struck with the injustice of the complaint. "He is ever the first to come in and amuse you with what news he knows."

"And in this instance he may have kept silence from a good motive—the wish to spare you pain," added Captain Bohun.

"True, true," murmured Mrs. Cumberland, her mind taking a more reasonable track. "Oliver has always been dutiful."

On departure, Captain Bohun crossed the road to Mr. Alexander's; a slight limp being visible in his gait. The mystery that appeared to be surrounding the surgeon's movements at present, puzzled him not a little; his prolonged absence seemed unaccountable. The surgery, through which he entered, was empty, and he opened the door leading from it to the house. A maid-servant met him.

"Is Mr. Alexander at home?"

"No, sir."

"Papa's gone to London," called out a young gentleman of ten, who came running along the passage, cracking a whip. "He went last night. They sent for him."

"Who sent for him?" asked Captain Bohun.

"The people. Mamma's gone too. They are coming home to-day; and mamma's going to bring me a Chinese puzzle and a box of chocolate if she had time to buy them."

Not much information, this. As Captain

Bohun turned out again, he stood at the door, wishing he had a decent plea to take him over to Mrs. Cumberland's again. He was an idle man; living only in the sweet pastime of making that silent love.

But Mrs. North never suspected that he was making it, or knew that he was intimate at Mrs. Cumberland's. Still less did she suspect that Mrs. Cumberland had a young lady inmate named Ellen Adair. It would have startled her to terror.

CHAPTER III.

IN MRS. GASS'S PARLOUR.

EARLY on the following morning the ringing out of the death-bell from the church at Dallory proclaimed to those who heard it that Edmund North had passed to his rest. He had never recovered consciousness, and died some thirty-six hours after the attack.

Amidst those who did not hear it was Oliver Rane. The doctor had been called out at daybreak to a country patient in an opposite direction, getting back between eight and nine o'clock.

He sat at his breakfast in the dining-room, unconscious of the morning's calamity. Hot coffee, broiled ham, two eggs. The table stood in front of the large bay-window.

"She has done it too much—stupid thing!" exclaimed Dr. Rane, cutting the slice of ham in two and apostrophising his unconscious ser-

vant. "Yesterday it was hardly warmed through. Just like them!—make a complaint, and they rush to the other extreme. I wonder how things are going on there this morning?"

He glanced up towards the distant quarter where the Hall was situated, for his query had reference to Edmund North; and this gave him the opportunity of seeing something else: a woman stepping out of Mrs. Cumberland's dining-room. She was getting on for forty, tall enough for a May-pole, with inquisitive green eyes, sallow cheeks, remarkably thin, as if she had lost her back teeth, and a bunch of black ringlets on either side her face. She wore the white apron and cap of a servant, but looked one of a superior class. Emerging from the opposite window, she stepped across the wire fence and approached Dr. Rane.

"What does Jelly want now?" he mentally asked.

Jelly! A curious name, no doubt, but it was hers. Fanny Jelly. When Mrs. Cumberland had engaged her as upper maid, she decided to call her by the latter name, Fanny being her own.

Jelly entered without ceremony—she was not given to observe much at the best of times. She had come to say that he need not provide anything for his dinner : her mistress meant to send him in a fowl—if he would accept it.

“With pleasure, tell her,” said Dr. Rane.
“How is my mother this morning, Jelly?”

“She has had a good night, and is pretty tolerable this morning,” replied Jelly, giving a backward fling to her flying cap-strings—for she did not follow the new fashion of a round bit of net on the back hair and call it a cap. “The foreign letters have come in ; two for her, one for Miss Adair.”

Dr. Rane, not particularly interested in the said foreign letters, went on eating his breakfast. Jelly, with characteristic composure, stood at ease just inside the window watching the process.

“That ham is dried up to fiddle-strings,” she suddenly said.

“Yes. Phyllis has done it too much.”

“And I should like to have the doing of her !” spoke Jelly in a wrathful tone. “It is a sin to spoil good food.”

“So it is,” said Dr. Rane.

"So that poor young man's gone!" she resumed as he cracked an egg.

The doctor lifted his head quickly. "What young man?"

"Edmund North. He died at half-past seven this morning."

"Who says it?" cried Dr. Rane, a startled look crossing his face and eyes.

"The milkman told me: he heard the passing-bell toll out. You needn't be surprised, sir: there has been no hope from the first."

"But there has been hope," disputed the doctor. "There was hope yesterday at mid-day, there was hope last night. I don't believe he is dead."

"Well, sir, then you must disbelieve it," equably answered Jelly; but she glanced keenly out at him from her green eyes. "Edmund North is as certainly dead as that I stand here."

He seemed strangely moved at the tidings: a quiver stirred his lips, the colour in his face faded to whiteness. Jelly, having looked as much as she chose, turned to depart.

"Then we are to send in the fowl, sir?"

"Yes, yes."

"Tell Phillis, please, that it will be all ready for the spit."

He watched her dreamily as she crossed the low fence and disappeared within her proper domains ; he pushed the ham, not eaten, from him, he turned sick at the underdone egg whose shell had just been broken. What, though he preferred eggs underdone in calm times ? calm times were not these. The news did indeed trouble him in no measured degree : it was so sad for a man in the prime of early life to be cut off thus : Edmund North was but a year or two older than himself : two days ago he had been as full of health and life, deep in the plans and projects of this world, thinking little of the next. Sad ? it was horrible. And Dr. Rane's breakfast was spoiled for that day.

He got up to walk the room restlessly : he looked at himself in the chimney glass ; possibly to see how the news might have affected his features ; in all he did there was a hurried confused kind of motion, betraying that the mind must be in a state of perturbation. By-and-by he snatched up his hat, and went forth, taking the direction of the Hall.

"I ought to call. It will look well for me

to call. It is a civility I owe them," he kept repeating at intervals, as he strode along. Just as though he thought in his inmost heart he ought *not* to call, and were seeking arguments to excuse to himself his doing so.

How eager he was to be there and see and hear all that was transpiring, he alone knew. No power could have stopped him, whether to go were suitable or unsuitable ; for he had a strong will. He did not take the lane this time, but went straight along the high road, turning in at the iron gates, and up the chestnut avenue. The young green of the trees was beautiful ; birds sang on their branches ; the blue sky flickered through the waving leaves. Winding on, Dr. Rane met Thomas Hepburn, the undertaker and carpenter : a sickly-looking but very intelligent and respectable man.

"Is it you, Hepburn?"

"Yes, sir ; I've been in to take the orders. What an awful thing it is !" he continued in a low tone, glancing round at the closed windows, as if fearful they might detect what he was saying. "The scoundrel that wrote the letter ought to be tried for murder when they

discover him. And they are safe to do that, sooner or later."

"The writer could have done no great harm but for Edmund North's allowing himself to go into that fatal passion."

"An anonymous writer is—an anonymous writer," rejoined Hepburn with scorn. "They say there'll not be an inquest."

"An inquest!" repeated the doctor, to whom the idea of one had never occurred. "There's no necessity for an inquest."

"Well, doctor, I suppose the law would in strictness exact it. But Mr. North is against it, and it's thought his wishes will be respected."

"Any of the medical men can furnish a certificate of the cause of death. I could give it myself."

"Yes, of course. But I've got no time to stay talking," added the undertaker. "Good-day to you, sir."

The next to come forth from the house was Alexander, the surgeon. Dr. Rane rubbed his eyes, almost thinking they deceived him. The brother practitioners shook hands ; and Mr. Alexander—a little man with dark hair—explained what had seemed unexplainable.

It appeared that the very same evening delivery which brought Mr. North the anonymous letter, had brought one to Mr. Alexander. His was from London, informing him that he had been appointed to a post connected with one of the hospitals, and requesting him to go up *at once* for a few hours. Mr. Alexander made ready, got a fly, and started with his wife for the station, bidding the driver halt at Mr. North's iron gates. As he was in attendance at that time on Edmund North, he wished to give notice of his temporary absence. To be attacked furiously by Edmund North the moment he got inside the doors, and, as it seemed to him, without rhyme or reason, put Mr. Alexander into a bit of a passion also. There was no time for elucidation, neither was a single word he said listened to, and the surgeon hastened out to his waiting fly. He had returned by the first train this morning—London was not much more than an hour's journey by rail—and found that Edmund North had died of that self-same passion. Half paralysed with grief and horror, Mr. Alexander hastened to the Hall; and was now coming from it, having fully exculpated himself in all ways in the

sight of its master. Nearly as fully he spoke now to Dr. Rane ; in his grief, in his straightforward candour, nothing selfish or sinister could hide itself.

The transaction in regard to drawing the bill had been wholly Edmund North's. Some few months ago he had sought Mr. Alexander, saying he was in want of a sum of money,—a hundred pounds ; he did not know how to put his hand just then upon it, not wishing to apply to his own family ; would he, the surgeon, like a good fellow, lend it ? At first, Mr. Alexander had excused himself ; for one thing he had not the money—fancy a poor, country surgeon, with a hundred pounds loose cash, he said ; but eventually he fell in with Edmund North's pleadings. A bill was drawn, both of them being liable, and was discounted by Dale, the lawyer of Whitborough. When the bill had become due (about a week ago) neither of them could meet it ; and the matter was arranged with Dale by a second bill.

“ What I cannot understand is, how Edmund North, poor fellow, could have pitched upon me as the writer of the letter,” observed the surgeon to Dr. Rane, when he had finished

his recital. "He must have gone clean daft to think it. I had no cause to disclose it; I did not fear but he would eventually meet the bill."

"I told them you could not have written it," quietly rejoined the doctor.

Mr. Alexander brought down his hand on a tree-branch with angry emphasis. "Rane, I'd give a thousand pounds out of my pocket—if I were a rich man, and had it—to know who wrote the letter and worked the mischief. I never disclosed the transaction to a living soul; I don't believe Edmund North did; besides us, it was known only to the discounter. Dale is a safe man; so it seems a regular mystery. And mark you, Rane—that letter was written to damage *me* at the Hall, not Edmund North."

Dr. Rane gazed at the other in great surprise. "To damage you?"

"It is the view I take of it. And so, on reflection, does Richard North."

"Nonsense, Alexander!"

"If ever the hidden particulars see daylight, you will find that it is not nonsense, but truth," was the surgeon's answer. "I must have some enemies in the neighbour-

hood, I suppose ; most professional men have ; and they no doubt hoped to do for me with Mr. North. The Norths in a degree sway other people here, and so I should have lost my practice, and been driven away.”

Oliver Rane had raised his cane, and was lightly flicking the shrub by which he stood, his air that of one in deep thought.

“I confess I do not follow you, Alexander. Your ill-doing and well-doing is nothing to Mr. North ; his son’s of course was. If you lived by drawing bills, it could be no concern of his.”

“The drawing of bills on my own score would certainly be of no moment to Mr. North ; but the drawing them *in conjunction with his son* would be. Upon which of us would he naturally lay the blame ? Upon a young, heedless man, as Edmund North was ; or upon me, a middle-aged, established member of society, with a home and a family ? The case speaks for itself.”

Oliver Rane did not appear quite to admit this. He thought the probability lay against Mr. Alexander’s theory, rather than with it. “Of course,” he slowly said, “looking at it in

that light, the letter would tell either way. But I think you must be wrong."

"No, I am not. Whoever wrote that missive did it to injure me. I seemed to see it, as by an instinct, the minute Mr. North gave me the letter to read. If the motive was to drive me from Dallory, it might have been spared and Edmund North saved; for I am going to quit it of my own accord."

"To quit Dallory?"

"In a month's time from this I and mine will have left it for London. The situation now given to me I have been trying for, under the rose, these six months past."

"But why do you wish to quit Dallory?"

"To better myself, as the servants say," replied Mr. Alexander, "and the move will do that considerably. Another reason is, that my wife dislikes Dallory. Madam turned her nose up at us socially when we first settled here; and that, in a degree, kept the best society closed to Mrs. Alexander. She is well-born, has been reared a lady: and of course it was enough to set her against the place. Besides, all our friends are in London. And so, you see, if my exit into the wilderness was what that anonymous individual was

driving at, he might have gained his ends without crime, had he waited but a short while."

"I hate Mrs. North," dreamily spoke Dr. Rane. "And I am sure she hates me—though the wherefore is to me incomprehensible."

"Look there," spoke the surgeon, dropping his voice.

Both had, simultaneously, caught sight of Mrs. North. She was passing the shrubbery close by, and looked out at them. They raised their hats. Mr. Alexander made a movement to approach her; she saw it, and turned from him back to the dark wall, with her usual sweeping step. So he remained where he was.

"She asked to see me on Tuesday night when I was leaving; wanting to know if I could tell her who wrote the letter," said Dr. Rane.

"She suspected me, I suppose."

"She appeared to suspect—not you, but somebody else. And that was Richard North."

"Richard North!" ironically repeated Mr. Alexander. "She knows quite well that he

is above suspicion. Perhaps she was only trying to divert attention from some other. She is made up of craft. Who knows but she wrote the letter herself?"

"Mrs. North!"

"Upon my word and honour the thought is in my mind, Rane. If the motive of the letter were as you think—to do Edmund North damage with his father—I know of only one person who would attempt it, and that is Mrs. North."

Their eyes met. A strange light shone momentarily in Oliver Rane's. In saying that he hated Mrs. North, he spoke truth; but there was every excuse for the feeling: for it was quite certain that Mrs. North had long been working him what ill she could. His marriage with Bessy was being delayed, and delayed entirely through her covert opposition.

"That she is an entirely unscrupulous woman and would stand at nothing, I feel sure," spoke Dr. Rane, drawing a deep breath.
"But, as to the letter—"

"Well—as to the letter?" cried the surgeon in the pause come to. "I don't say she fore-saw that it would kill him."

"This would disprove your theory of its being written to damage you, Alexander."

"Not altogether. The damaging another, more or less, would be of no moment at all to Mrs. North. She'd crush anybody without scruple."

"I'm sure she'd crush me," spoke Dr. Rane. "Heaven knows for why : I don't."

"Well, if she did write the letter, I think her conscience must smite her as she looks at the poor dead man lying there. Good day, Rane. I have not been home to see my little ones yet. Mrs. Alexander is remaining in town for a day or two."

In talking, they had walked slowly to the end of the avenue. Mr. Alexander passed through the gates and took the road towards the Ham.

"I may as well go on at once, and see Ketler," thought Dr. Rane. "Time enough to call at the Hall as I return."

So he went on towards Dallory. Two gentlemen passed him on horseback, county magistrates, who were probably going to the Hall. The sight of them turned his thoughts to the subject of an inquest : he began speculating why Mr. North wished to evade it—

and whether he would succeed. For his own part, he did not see that the case, speaking in point of law, called for one. Hepburn said it did : and he was supposed, as undertaker in chief to Dallory, to understand these things.

Deep in reflection, the doctor strode on ; when, in passing Mrs. Gass's house, a sharp tapping at the window saluted his ear. It came from that lady herself, and she flung up the sash.

"Just come in, will you, Dr. Rane ? I want you for something very particular."

He felt sure she only wanted to question him about the death ; and would a great deal rather have gone on. But with her red and smiling face inviting him in peremptorily, he did not see his way clear to refuse.

"And so he is *gone*—that poor young man !" she began, meeting him in her smart dress and pink cap. "When I heard the death-bell strike out this morning, it sounded to me a'most like my own knell."

"Yes, he is *gone*—unhappily," murmured Dr. Rane.

"Well now, doctor, the next thing is—what became of you yesterday ?"

The transition of subject appeared peculiar.

"Became of me?" repeated Dr. Rane.

"How do you mean?"

"All the mortal day I was stuck at this here parlour window, waiting to see you go by," proceeded Mrs. Gass. "You never passed once."

"Yes, I did. I passed by in the morning."

"My eyes must have gone a-maying then, for they never saw you," was Mrs. Gass's answer.

"It was before my usual hour. I was called out early to a sick man in Dallory, and I took the opportunity to see Ketler at the same time."

"Then that accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nuts; and I wasted my time for nothing," was her good-tempered rejoinder.

"Why did you want to see me pass?"

Mrs. Gass paused for a moment before replying. She glanced round to see that the door was closed, and dropped her voice nearly to a whisper.

"Dr. Rane, who wrote that fatal letter?"

"I cannot tell."

"Did you?"

Oliver Rane stared at her, a sudden flush of anger dyeing his brow. No wonder: the

question, put with emphatic earnestness, seemed an assertion, almost like that startling reproach of Nathan to David.

"Mrs. Gass, I do not know what you mean."

"I see you don't relish it, doctor. But I am a plain body, as you know ; and when in doubt about a thing, pleasant or unpleasant, I like to ask an explanation straight out."

"But why should you be in doubt about this?" he enquired, wonderingly. "What can induce you to connect me with the letter?"

Mrs. Gass took her portly person across the room to a desk ; unlocked it, and brought forth a folded piece of paper. She handed it to Dr. Rane.

It was not a letter ; it could not be the copy of one : but it did appear to be the rough sketch of the anonymous missive that had reached Mr. North. Some of the sentences were written two or three times over ; in a close hand, in a scrawling hand, in a reversed hand, as if the writer were practising different styles ; in others the construction was altered, words were erased, different

ones substituted. Oliver Rane gazed upon it like one in complete bewilderment.

“What *is* this, Mrs. Gass?”

“Is it not the skeleton of the letter?”

“No, certainly not. And yet——” Dr. Rane broke off and ran his eyes over the lines again and again. “There is a similarity in some of the phrases,” he suddenly said.

“Some of the phrases is identical,” returned Mrs. Gass. “When Mr. Richard North was here yesterday, I got him to repeat over to me the words of the letter; word for word, so far as he remembered ‘em, and I knew ‘em for *these* words. Whoever writ that letter to Mr. North, doctor, first of all tried his sentences and his hand on this paper, practising how he could best do it.”

“How did you come by this?”

“You left it here the night before last.”

“I left it here!” repeated Dr. Rane, looking as if he mentally questioned whether Mrs. Gass was in her right senses.

“Yes. You.”

“But you must be dreaming, Mrs. Gass.”

“I never do dream—that sort of dreaming,” replied Mrs. Gass. “Look here”—putting her stout hand, covered with valuable

rings, on his coat-sleeve—"didn't you upset your pocket-book here that night? Well, this piece of paper fell out of it."

"It could not have done anything of the sort," he repeated, getting flushed and angry again. "All the papers that fell out of my pocket-book I picked up and returned to it."

"You didn't pick up this; it must have fluttered away unseen. Just after you were gone I dropped my spectacle-case, and in stooping for it, I saw this piece of paper lying in the shade of the table's claw."

"But it could not have come out of my pocket-book. Just tell me if you please, Mrs. Gass, what should bring such a document in my possession?"

"That's just what I can't tell. The paper was not there before candle-light; I'll answer for that much; so where else could it have come from?"

The last words were not spoken as an assertion of her view, but as a question. Dr. Rane looked at her, she at him; both seeming equally puzzled.

"Had you any visitor last evening besides myself?" he asked.

"Not a soul. The only person who came

into the parlour, barring my own servants, was Molly Green, under-housemaid at the Hall. She lived with me once, and calls in sometimes in passing to ask how I am. They sent her into Dallory for something wanted at the chemist's, and she looked in to tell me. The thing had just happened."

Dr. Rane's brow lost its perplexity: an easy smile, as if the mystery were solved, crossed his face. The hint, recently given him by Mr. Alexander, was in his mind.

"I am glad you've told me this, Mrs. Gass. The paper was more likely to have been left by Molly Green than by me. It may have dropped from her petticoats."

"Goodness bless the man! From her petticoats! Why she had run all the way from the Hall. And how was she likely to pick it up in *that* house—even though her gown-hem had been finished off with pot-hooks?"

"What cause have I given you to suspect *me* of this?" retorted Dr. Rane in a harsh tone.

"Only this—that I don't see where the paper could have come from but out of your own pocket-book," replied Mrs. Gass frankly.

"I have no other cause to suspect you ; I'd as soon suspect myself. It is just a mystery, and nothing else."

"Whatever the mystery may be, it is not connected with my pocket-book, Mrs. Gass," he emphatically said. "Did you mention this to Richard North ?"

"No. Nor to anybody else. It was not a pleasant thing to speak of, you see."

"Not a pleasant thing for me, certainly, to be suspected of having dropped that paper. The culprit, an innocent one, no doubt, must have been Molly Green."

"I never was so brought up in all my life," cried the puzzled woman. "As to Molly Green—it must be just a fancy of yours, doctor, for it never can be fact."

Oliver Rane drew his chair a little nearer to Mrs. Gass and whispered a word of the doubt touching Mrs. North. He only spoke of it as a doubt ; a hint at most : but Mrs. Gass was not slow to take it.

"Heaven help the woman !—if it's her work."

"But this must not be breathed aloud," he said, taking alarm. "It may be a false suspicion."

"Don't fear me : it's a thing too grave for me to mix myself up in," was the reply : and to give Mrs. Gass her due, she did look scared in no slight degree. "Dr. Rane, I am sorry for saying what I did to you. It was the impossibility, as I took it, of anything's having left it here but that flutter of papers from your pocket-book. Who ever would have gave a thought to Molly Green?"

Dr. Rane made no answer.

"She put her basket down by the door there, and came up the room to look at my geraniums ; I held the candle for her. I remember she caught her crinoline on the corner of the iron fender, and it gave her a twist round. The idiots that girls make of themselves with them big crinolines ! Perhaps it dropped from her then."

"Well, let us bury it in silence, Mrs. Gass ; it is but a doubt at best," said the prudent but less eloquent physician. "You will allow me to take this, he added," alluding to the paper. "I should like to examine it at leisure."

"Take it, and welcome," she answered ; "I'm glad to be rid of it. As to burying it in silence, we had better, I expect, both do that."

"Even to Richard North," he enjoined rather anxiously.

"Even to Richard North. I have kept secrets in my day, doctor, and can keep 'em again."

Dr. Rane put the paper in his pocket-book, deposited that in the breast pocket of his coat, and took his departure. But now, being a shrewd man, a suspicion that he would not have given utterance to for the whole world, lay on Dr. Rane—that it was more likely, more in accordance with probability, the paper had dropped out of his pocket-book than from Molly Green's petticoats, seeing they were *not* finished off with fish-hooks.

A heavy weight, lying there on his breast ! And he went along with a loitering step, asking himself how the paper could have originally come there.

CHAPTER IV.

ALONE WITH THE NAKED TRUTH.

O LIVER RANE was in his bed-chamber ; a front apartment facing the road. It will be as well to give a word of description to this first-floor, for it may prove needful as the tale goes on. There was a very large landing-place, the boards white and bare, with a spacious window looking full to the side of the other house, as the dining-room beneath it did. Wide, low, and curtainless was this landing-window ; imparting, in conjunction with the bare floors and walls, a staring, bleak appearance to the place. Mrs. Cumberland's opposite landing (could you have seen it) presented quite a different aspect, with its rich carpet of many colours, its statues, vases, book-cases, and its tasty window-drapery. Dr. Rane could not afford luxuries yet ; or, indeed, superfluous furniture. The stairs led down

nearly close to this window, so that in coming from any of the bed-rooms, or the upper floor, to descend below, you had to face it.

To get into Dr. Rane's chamber—the best in the house—an ante-room had to be passed through, whose door was opposite to the large window. Two chambers opened from the back of the landing : they faced the back lane that ran along beyond the garden wall. Above, in the roof, were two other rooms, both three-cornered. Phillis the old serving-woman slept on that floor in one of them, Dr. Rane on this : the house had no other inmates.

The ante-room had no furniture : unless some curious-looking articles lying on the floor could be called such. They seemed to consist chiefly of glass : jars covered in dust, a cylindrical glass-pump, and other things pertaining to chemistry, of which science the doctor was fond. Certainly the architect had not made the most of this floor, or he would never have expended so much space on the landing. But if this ante-room was not furnished, Dr. Rane's chamber was ; and well, too. The entrance door was in the middle of the beautifully papered wall of white and gold, the dressing-table and glass stood op-

posite before the window. The fire-place was on the left ; a handsome white Arabian bedstead picked out with gold on the right, its hangings, of green damask, matching the window drapery and in colour the soft carpet. Other furniture stood about, all very good of its kind, and the whole in harmony.

Seated at the round table in the middle of the room, his hand raised to support his head, was Dr. Rane. He had but just come in, and it was now one o'clock—his ordinary dinner-hour. It was that same morning told of in the last chapter, when he had quitted Mrs. Gass's house with that dangerous piece of paper weighing down his pocket and his heart. He had been detained out. As he was entering the door of the sick man, Ketler, whom he had proceeded at once to see, a bustle in the street, and much wild running of women, warned him that something must have happened. Two men had fallen into the river at the back of the North Works ; and excited people were shouting that they were drowned. Not quite : as Dr. Rane saw when he reached the spot : not beyond hope of restoration. Patiently the doctor persevered

in his endeavours. He got life into them at length ; and stayed afterwards caring for them. After that, he had Ketler and other patients to see, and it was nearly one when he bent his steps towards home. In the morning he had said to himself that he would call at the Hall on his return ; but he passed its gates ; perhaps because it was his dinner-hour, for one o'clock was striking.

Hanging up his hat in the small hall, leaving his cane in the corner—a pretty little thing with a gold stag for its head—he was making straight for the stairs, when the servant, Phillis, came out of the kitchen. A little woman of some five-and-fifty years, with high shoulders, and her head poking forward. Her chin and nose were sharp now, but the once good-looking face was meek and mild, the sweet dark eyes were subdued, and the hair, peeping from beneath the close white cap, was grey. She wore a dark cotton gown and check apron, and her arms were bare to the elbow. A tidy-looking, respectable woman, in spite of her unfashionable appearance.

“ Is that you, master ? Them folks have been over from the brick-kilns, saying the

woman's not so well to-day, if you'd please to go to her."

Dr. Rane nodded his head. He went on up the stairs and into his own room, the door of which he locked. Why? Phyllis was not in the habit of intruding upon him, and there was no one else in the house. The first thing he did was to take the paper, received from Mrs. Gass, out of his pocket-book, and read it attentively twice over. Then he struck a match, set fire to it, and watched it consume away in the empty grate. A dangerous memento, whosesoever hand had penned it; and the physician did well, in the interests of humanity, to put it out of sight for ever. The task over, he leaned against the window-frame, in the shade of the flowing damask window-curtain, and lapsed into thought. He was dwelling upon the death at Dallory Hall, and what it might bring forth.

Hepburn, the undertaker, was right. There was to be no inquest. So much Dr. Rane had learned from Richard North: who had hastened to the works on hearing of the accident to his men. The two Whitborough doctors had given the certificate of death—apoplexy, to which there had been a previous

tendency, though immediately brought on by excitement—and nothing more was required by law. From a word spoken by Richard, Dr. Rane gathered that it was Madam (as Mrs. North was very generally called) who had set her veto against an inquest. And quite right too ; there was no necessity whatever for one, had been the answering comment made by Oliver Rane to Richard. But now—now when he was alone with himself and the naked truth ; when there was no man at hand whose opinion it might be well to humour or deceive ; no eye upon him save God's, he could not help acknowledging that had he been Mr. North, had it been his son who was thus cut off from life, he should have called for an inquest to be held. Ay, ten inquests, and the law would have allowed them ; if by that means he might have traced the letter home to its writer.

Quitting his place by the window, he sat down at the table and bent his forehead upon his hand. Never in his whole life had anything so affected him as this death : and it was perhaps natural that he should set himself to see whether, or not, any kind of excuse might be found for the anonymous writer.

He began by putting himself in idea into the writer's place, and argued the point for him ; for and against. Chiefly *for*: it was on that side his bias leaned. It is very easy, as the world knows, to find a plea for those in whom we are interested or on whom misfortune falls ; it is so natural to indulge for their sakes in a little sophistry. Such sophistry came now to the help of the physician.

"What cause had Edmund North to fly into a dangerous passion ?" ran the self-argument. "Only a madman would have been expected to do so. There was nothing in the letter that need have excited him, absolutely nothing. It was (probably) written with a very harmless view ; certainly the writer never could have dreamt that it might have the effect of destroying a life."

Destroying a man's life ! A flush passed into Oliver Rane's face at the thought, dyeing neck and brow crimson. And, with it, came back the words of Hepburn—that the writer was a murderer and might come to be tried for it. A murderer ! a slayer of one's inoffensive fellow-man ! There is no other self-reproach under heaven that can bring home so

much anguish to the conscience. But—could a man be justly called a murderer if he had never had thought or intention to do anything of the kind ?

“Wait here,” said Dr. Rane, beginning to speak aloud, as if he were a special pleader arguing in a law court. “Can a man be called a murderer who has never had the smallest intention to murder—who would have flown in horror from the bare idea ? Let us suppose it was—Mrs. North—who wrote the letter ? Alexander suspects her, at any rate. Put it that she had some motive for writing it. It might have been a good motive—that of stopping Edmund North in his downward career, as the letter intimated—and she fancied this might be best accomplished by letting his father hear of what he, in conjunction with Alexander, was doing. According to Alexander, she does not interfere openly between the young men and their father ; it’s not her policy : and she may have considered the means she took were legitimate under the circumstances. Well, could she for a moment imagine that any terrible consequences would ensue ? A rating from Mr. North to his son, and the matter would be over. Just so : she

was innocent of any other thought. Then how can she be deemed guilty?"

Dr. Rane paused. A book lay on the table : he turned its leaves backwards and forwards in abstraction, his mind never quitting the subject. Presently he resumed.

"Or—take Alexander's view of the letter—that it was written to damage him with Mr. North and the neighbourhood generally. Madam—say again—had conceived a dislike to Alexander, wished him dismissed from the house, but had no plea for doing it, and so took *that* means—the sending of a letter to her husband. Could she suspect that the result would be fatal to Edmund North? Would she not have shrunk with genuine abhorrence from penning the letter, had she foreseen it? Certainly ; certainly. Then, under these circumstances, how can a man—I mean a woman—be responsible, legally or morally, for the death? It would be utterly unjust to charge her with it. Edmund North is alone to blame. Clearly so. The case is little better than a case of unintentional suicide."

Having arrived at this view of the subject—so comforting for the unknown writer—Dr. Rane rose briskly, and began to wash his

hands and smoothe his hair. He took a note-case from his pocket, in which he was in the habit of dotting down his daily engagements, to see at what hour he could most conveniently go to the brick-fields, in compliance with the message just received. The sick woman was in no danger, as he knew, and he might choose his own time. In passing through the ante-room—which room, by the way, was generally distinguished as the Drab Room, from the unusual colour of the walls, drab and hideous—he took up one of the glass jars, requiring it for some purpose downstairs. And then he noticed something that displeased him.

“*Phillis!*” he called, putting his head out on the landing; “*Phillis!*” And the woman, a very active little body, came running up.

“ You have been sweeping the Drab Room?”

“ It was so dirty, master.”

“ Now look you here,” he cried, angrily. “ If you sweep out a room again, when I tell you it is not to be swept, I’ll keep every place in the house locked up. Some of the glass here is valuable, and I’ll not run the risk of having it broken with brooms and brushes.”

Down went Phillis, taking the reproof in silence. As Dr. Rane crossed the landing to follow her, his eyes naturally fell on his mother's house through the large window. The answering window opposite, Mrs. Cumberland's, was being cleaned by one of the servants ; at the window of the dining-room underneath, his mother was sitting. It put Dr. Rane in mind that he had not been in to see her for nearly two days ; not since Edmund North——

All in a moment, induced perhaps by the name, a sense of the delusive nature of the sophistry he had been indulging, flashed into his brain, and the truth shone out distinct and bare. Edmund North was dead ; killed by the anonymous letter. But for that fatal letter he had been alive and well now. A sickening sensation, as of some great oppression, crowded over Oliver Rane, and his nerveless fingers dropped the jar.

Out ran Phillis, lifting her hands at the crash of glittering mites lying in the passage. "He has broke one himself now," thought she, referring to the reproof about the glasses.

"Just sweep the pieces carefully into a dust-pan, and throw them away," said her

master as he passed on. “The jar slipped out of my fingers.”

Phillis stared a minute, getting rid of her surprise, and then turned to fetch the dustpan. The doctor went on to the front door, instead of into the dining-room, as Phillis expected.

“Master,” she called out, running after him, “your dinner’s waiting. The fowl’s on the table, and I was just coming in with the potatoes.”

But Dr. Rane passed on as though he had not heard her, and shut the door with a bang.

He turned into his mother’s house. Not by the familiar mode of the open window ; he did not gain the premises by stepping over the slight fence ; but he knocked at the front door, and was admitted as any ordinary visitor. Whether it was from having lived apart for so many years of their lives, or that a something was wanting of social cordiality in the disposition of each, certain it was that Dr. Rane and his mother observed more ceremony with each other, and were less familiar, than what usually obtains between mother and son.

Mrs. Cumberland sat at the open dining-

room window just as he had seen her from his staircase landing ; a newspaper lay behind her on a small table, put out of hand when read. Ellen Adair, as might be heard, was at the piano in the drawing-room, playing, perhaps from unconscious association, and low and softly as it was her delight to play, the “Dead March in Saul.” The dirge grated on the ears of Dr. Rane.

“What a melancholy drawl !” he involuntarily exclaimed ; and Mrs. Cumberland looked up, there was so much irritation in the tone.

He shook hands with his mother, but did not kiss her, which he was not accustomed to do, and stood back against the broad window, his face turned to it.

“You are a stranger, Oliver,” she said.
“What has kept you away ?”

“I have been busy. To-day especially. They had an accident at the works—two men nearly drowned—and I have been with them all the morning.”

“I heard of it. Jelly brought me in the news ; she seems to hear everything. How fortunate that you were at hand !”

He proceeded rather volubly to give the

particulars of the accident and of the process he adopted to recover the men ; voluble for him. Mrs. Cumberland looked and listened with silent, warm affection ; but that she was a particularly undemonstrative woman, she would have shown it in her manner. In her partial eyes, there was not so fine and handsome and estimable a man in all Dallory as this her only son.

“ Oliver, what a dreadful thing this is about Edmund North ! I have not seen you since. Why did you not come in and tell me the same night ?”

He turned his eyes on her for a moment to express surprise, and paused. “ I am not in the habit of coming in to tell you when called out to patients, mother. How was I to know you wished it ?”

“ Nonsense, Oliver ! This is not an ordinary thing. The Norths were something to me once. I have had Edmund on my knee when he was a baby ; and I should have liked you to pay me the attention of bringing in the news. Only to put it on the score of gossip, it would have been welcome,” she added with a half-smile at the words. “ It appears to be altogether a more romantic

event than one meets with every day, and such things, you know are of interest to lonely women."

Dr. Rane made no rejoinder, possibly not having any sufficient excuse to offer for his carelessness. He stood looking dreamily from a corner of the window. Phillis (as might be seen from thence) was carrying away the fowl and a tureen of sauce. Mrs. Cumberland probably thought he was watching with critical curiosity the movements of his handmaid. She resumed.

"They say, Oliver, there has been no hope of him from the first."

"There was very little. Of course—as it turns out—there could have been none."

"And who wrote the letter? With what motive was it written?" proceeded Mrs. Cumberland, her pale, grey face leaning slightly forward, as she waited for an answer.

"It is of no use to ask me, mother. Some people hold one opinion, some another; mine would go for little."

"They are beginning now to think that it was not written at all to injure Edmund, but Mr. Alexander."

“Who told you that?” he asked, a sharper accent discernible in his tone.

“Captain Bohun. He came in this morning to apprise me of the death. Considering that I have no claim upon him; that a year ago I had never spoken to him, I must say that Arthur Bohun is very kind and attentive to me. He’s one in a thousand.”

Perhaps the temptation to say, “It’s not for your sake he is attentive,” momentarily assailed Oliver Rane. But he was good-natured in the main: and he knew when to hold his tongue and when to speak; no man better. Besides, it was no business of his.

“I entertain a different opinion,” he observed, referring to the point in discussion. “Of course it is all guess-work what the writer’s motive was, or what it was not. There’s no profit in discussing it, mother. And I must be going, for my dinner’s waiting. Thank you for sending me the fowl.”

“A moment yet, Oliver,” she interposed, touching his arm as he was passing her to move away. “Have you heard that Alexander is going to leave?”

“Yes. He was talking with me about it this morning.”

If ever a glow of hope, of light, had been seen lately on Mrs. Cumberland's marble face, it was seen then. The tightly-drawn skin on the features had lost its grey tinge.

"Oliver, I could go down on my knees and thank Heaven for it. You don't know how grieved I have felt all through these past two years, to see you put into the shade by that man, and to know that it was I who had brought you here! It will be all right now. New houses are to be built, they say, at the other end of the Ham, and the practice will be worth a great deal. I shall sleep well to-night."

He smiled as he shook hands with her; partly in affection, partly at her unusual vehemence. In passing the drawing-room, Ellen Adair happened to be coming out of it, but he went on. She supposed he had not observed her, and spoke.

"Ah, how do you do, Miss Adair?" he said, turning back and offering his hand. "Forgive my haste, I am busy to-day."

And before she had time to say an answering syllable, he was gone. Leaving an impression on her mind, she could not well have told why or wherefore, that he was ill at ease:

that he had hastened away, not from pressure of business, but because he did not care to stay to talk.

If that feeling was pervading Dr. Rane, and had reference to the world in general and not to the young lady in particular, it might not have been agreeable to him to encounter an acquaintance as he turned out of his mother's house. Mr. Alexander was swiftly passing on his way towards home from the lower part of the Ham, and stopped.

"I wish I'd never said a syllable about my going away till I was off," cried he in his free, off-hand manner—a pleasanter manner and more sociable than Dr. Rane's. "The news has been noised abroad, and I've got the whole place upon me; asking this, questioning that. One man comes and wants to know if I'll sell my furniture; another thinks he'd like the house as it stands. My patients are up in arms; say I'm doing it to kill them. I shall have some of them in a fever before the day's over."

"Perhaps you'll not go, after all," observed Dr. Rane.

"Not go! How can I help going? I'm elected to the post. Why, it's what I've

been looking out for ever so long—almost ever since I've been here. No, no, Rane ; a short while, and Dallory Ham will have seen the last of me."

He hastened across the road to his house, on the run, like a man who has the world's work on his busy shoulders. Dr. Rane's thoughts, as he glanced after him, reverted to the mental argument he had held in his chamber, and he unconsciously resumed it, putting himself in the place of the unknown, miserable writer, as before.

" It's almost keener than the death itself—if the motive *was* to do Alexander injury in his profession, or drive him from the place—to know that he—or she—Mrs. North—might have spared her pains ! Heavens ! what a remorse it must be !—to commit a crime and then find there was no necessity for it !"

Dr. Rane wiped his brow with his white handkerchief—the day was very warm—and turned into his house. Phillis once more put the dinner on the table, and he sat down to it.

But not a mouthful could he swallow ; his throat was like so much dried chip, and the food would not go down. Phillis, who was

coming in for something or other, saw him leave his plate, and rise from table.

“Ain’t it tender, sir?”

“Tender?” he responded, as though he did not catch the sense of the question, and paused. “Oh, it’s tender enough : but I must go to see a patient. Get your own dinner.”

“Surely you’ll come back to yours, sir?”

“I’ve had mine—as much as I want. Take the things away.”

“I wonder what’s come to him?” mused the woman as his quick steps receded from the house, and she was left alone with the rejected dishes. A consciousness came dimly penetrating to her hazy brain that there was some change upon him. What it was, or where it lay, she did not define. It was unusual for his strong firm fingers to drop a glass ; it was still more unusual for him to explain cause and effect. “The jar slipped from my fingers.” “I’ve had as much as I want. I must go to see a patient.” It was quite out of the common order of routine for Dr. Rane to be explanatory to his servant on any subject whatever ; and perhaps it was his having been so in these two instances that took hold of Phyllis.

“How quick he must have eaten his dinner!”

Phillis nearly dropped the dish of fowl. The words were spoken close behind her, and she had believed herself alone in the house. Turning round, she saw Jelly, standing half in, half out at the window.

“Well, I’m sure!” cried Phillis, wrathfully. “You needn’t come startling a body in that way, Mrs. Jelly. How did you know but the doctor might be at table?”

“I’ve just seen him go down the lane,” returned Jelly, who had plenty of time for gossiping with her neighbours, the duties at home not being onerous, and had come strolling over the garden fence now with no other object. “Has he had his dinner? It’s but the other minute he was in at our house.”

“He has had as much as he means to have,” answered Phillis, her anger evaporating, for she liked a social gossip too. “I’m sure it’s not worth the trouble of serving meals, if they are to be left in this fashion. It was the same thing at breakfast.”

Jelly recollect ed the scene at breakfast; the startled pallor on Dr. Rane’s face, when told that Edmund North was dead: she supposed that had stopped his appetite. Her

inquisitive eyes turned unceremoniously to the fowl, and she saw that the merest bit of the tip of the liver-wing was alone eaten.

"Perhaps he is not well to-day," said Jelly.

"I don't know about his being well; he's odder than I ever saw him," answered Phillis. "I shouldn't wonder but he has had his stomach turned over them two half-drowned men."

Putting the doors open, she carried the dinner-things across to the kitchen. Jelly, who assisted at the ceremony, so far as watching and talking went, was standing in the passage, when her quick eyes caught sight of two small bits of glass. She stooped to pick them up.

"Look here, Phillis! You 'ave been breaking something. It's uncommonly careless to leave the pieces about."

"Is it!" retorted Phillis. "You've got your eyes in everything. I thought I took 'em all up," she added, looking on the ground.

"What did you break?"

"Nothing. The doctor did. He dropped one of them dusty glass jars down the stairs. It did give me a start. You should have heard the smash."

"What made him drop it?" asked Jelly.

"Goodness knows," returned the older woman. "He's not a bit like himself to-day; it's just as if something had come to him."

She began to eat her dinner as she spoke, standing, her usual mode of taking it. The whole of the fowl was put by into the larder, including the cut wing on the doctor's plate, and she contented herself with a piece of bacon and the gravy remaining in the dish, sopping it up with the potatoes. Phillis was of too economical a turn to waste dainty fowl upon herself, though quite at liberty to do so. Dr. Rane sometimes asked her what she lived upon: Phillis would answer that she lived as well as she ever had lived, and as well as she cared to live. Bread and butter and tea were her chief luxuries.

Jelly, following her customary free-and-easy habits, stood against the door-post, apparently interested in the progress of the meal. They presented a contrast, these two women, the one a thin giantess bolt upright, the other a dwarf stooping forward. Jelly, a lady's maid, held herself of course altogether above Phillis, an ignorant (as Jelly would have de-

scribed her) servant-of-all-work, though condescending to drop in for the sake of gossip.

"Did you happen to hear how the doctor found Ketler?"

"As if I should be likely to hear!" was Phillis's retort. "He'd not tell me, and I couldn't ask. My master's not one of them you can put questions to, Jelly."

A silence ensued. The gossip apparently flagged to-day. Phillis had it chiefly to herself, for Jelly vouchsafed but a brief answering remark now and again. She was engaged in the mental process of wondering what *had* come to Dr. Rane.

CHAPTER V.

RETROSPECT.

THERE must be some retrospect to make things intelligible ; and it may as well be given at once.

Mr. North, now of Dallory Hall, had got on entirely by his own persevering industry. Of obscure, though in a certain way very respectable parentage, he had been placed as working apprentice to a firm in Whitborough. It was a firm in extensive work, not confining itself to one branch. They took contracts for public buildings, small and large ; they did mechanical engineering ; they had planned one of the early railways. John North—plain Jack North he was known as, then—remained with the firm when he was out of his time, and got on in it. Thrifty, steady, and plodding, he rose from one step to another ; and at length, in conjunction with one

who had been in the same firm, he set up for himself. This other was Thomas Gass. Gass had not risen from the ranks, as North had : he was of good connections and had received a superior education ; but his friends were poor. North and Gass, as the new firm called itself, began business near to Dallory ; quietly at first—as all people, who truly look to get on, generally do begin. They rose rapidly. The confined premises grew into great ones ; the small contracts into larger. People said luck was with them—and in truth it seemed so. The Dallory works became of note in the county, employing quite a colony of people : the masters were respected and sought after. Both of them lived at Whitborough ; Mr. North with his wife and family ; Mr. Gass a bachelor.

Thomas Gass had one brother ; a clergyman. Their only sister, Fanny, a pretty young girl, had her home with him in his rectory, but she came often to Whitborough on a visit to Thomas. Suddenly it was announced to the world that she had engaged herself to be married to a Captain Rane, entirely against the wish of her two brothers. She was under twenty ; Captain Rane, a

poor naval man on half-pay, was nearly old enough to be her grandfather. Their objection lay not so much to this, as to *him*. For some cause or other, neither liked him. The Reverend William Gass forbid his sister to think of him ; Mr. Thomas Gass (a fiery man) swore he would never afterwards look upon her as a sister, if she persisted in thus throwing herself away.

Miss Gass did persist. She possessed the obstinate spirit of her brother Thomas, though without his fire. She chose to take her own way, and married Captain Rane. They sailed at once for Madras ; Captain Rane having obtained some post there, connected with the government ships.

Whether Miss Gass repented of her ill-assorted marriage, her brothers had no means of learning ; for she, cherishing anger, never wrote to them during her husband's life. It was a very short one. Barely a twelvemonth had elapsed after the knot was tied, when there came a pitiful letter from her. Captain Rane had died, just as her little son Oliver (named after a friend, she said) was born. Thomas Gass, to whom the letter had been specially written, gathered that she was left

badly off ; though she did not absolutely say it. He went into one of his fumes, and tossed the epistle across the desk to his partner. " You must do something for her, Gass," said John North when he had read it. " I never will," hotly affirmed Mr. Gass. " Fanny knows what I promised if she married Rane—that I would never help her during my life or after it. She knows another thing—that I am not one to go from my word. William may help her if he likes : he has not got much to give away, but he can have her back to live with him." " Help the child then," suggested Mr. North, knowing further remonstrance to be useless. " I won't help the child," returned obstinate Thomas Gass ; " I'll stick to the spirit of my promise as well as the letter." And Mr. North bent his head down again—he was going over some estimates—feeling that the affair was none of his. " I don't mind putting 'the boy in the tontine, North," presently spoke the junior partner. " The tontine !" echoed John North in surprise, " what tontine ?" " What tontine !" returned the hard man—though in truth he was not hard in general, " why the one that you and others are getting up ; the

one you have just put your baby, Bessy, in ; I know of no other tontine." "But that will not benefit the boy," urged Mr. North : "certainly not now ; and the chances are nine to one against its ever benefiting him." "Never mind ; I'll put him in it," said Mr. Gass, whose obstinacy always came out well when spurred by opposition. "You are wanting a tenth child to close the list, and I'll put him in it." So into the tontine Oliver Rane, unconscious infant, was put.

But Mrs. Rane did not further trouble either of her brothers ; or, as things turned out, require assistance from them. She remained in India ; and at a year's end married a government chaplain there, the Reverend George Cumberland, who had some private property. Little, if any, communication took place afterwards between her and her brothers : she cherished resentment for old grievances, and would not write. And so, the sister and the brothers seemed to fade away from each other henceforth. We all know how relatives, parted by time and distance, become estranged, disappearing almost from memory.

While the firm, North and Gass, was rising

higher and higher in wealth and importance, the wife of its senior partner died. She left three children, Edmund, Richard, and Bessy. Subsequently, during a visit to London, chance drew Mr. North into a meeting with a handsome young woman, the widow of Major Bohun. She was not long from India, where she had buried her husband. A flashing, designing, attractive syren, who began forthwith to exercise her dangerous fascinations on plain, unsuspecting Mr. North. She had but a poor pittance : what money there was belonged to her only child, Arthur ; a little lad ; sent out of sight already to a preparatory school. Report had magnified Mr. North's wealth into something fabulous ; and Mrs. Bohun did not cease her scheming until she had caught him in her toils and he had made her Mrs. North.

Men do things sometimes in a hurry, only to repent. That Mr. North had been in a hurry in this case was indisputable—it was just as though Mrs. Bohun had thrown a spell over him : whether he repented when he woke up and found himself with a wife, a step-mother for his little ones at home, was not so sure. He was a sufficiently wise man

in those days to conceal what he did not want known.

Whom he had married, beyond the fact that she was the widow of Major Bohun, he did not know from Adam. For all she disclosed about her own family, in regard to whom she maintained an entire reticence, she might have dropped from the moon, or “growed” like Topsy; but, from the airs and graces she put on, Mr. North might have concluded they were dukes and duchesses at least. Her late husband’s family were irreproachable, both in character and position. The head of it was Sir Nash Bohun, representative of an ancient baronetcy, and elder brother of the late Major. Before the wedding tour was over, poor Mr. North found that his wife was a cold, imperious, extravagant woman, not to be questioned by any means if she chose not to be. When her fascinations were in full play (while she was only the widow Bohun) Mr. North had been ready to think her quite an angel. Where had all the amiability flown?—he rubbed his mental eyes as he asked it. People do change after marriage somehow. At least, there have been instances known of it.

A little circumstance occurred one day that—to put it mildly—had surprised Mr. North. He had been given to understand by his wife that Major Bohun died suddenly of sun-stroke: she had certainly told him so. In talking at a dinner-party at Sir Nash Bohun's with some gentleman not long from India, he and Mr. North being side by side at table after the ladies had retired, the subject of sun-strokes came up. “My wife's former husband, Major Bohun, died of one,” innocently observed Mr. North. “Died of *what?*” cried the other, putting down his claret-glass, which he was about to convey to his mouth. “Of sun-stroke,” repeated Mr. North. “Bohun did not die of sun-stroke,” came the impulsive answer, “who told you he died of that?” “She did—my wife,” was Mr. North's answer. “Oh,” said his friend; and drank the claret. “Why, what did he die of, if it was not sun-stroke?” asked Mr. North, with curiosity. “Well—I—I don't know; I'd rather say no more about it,” was the conclusive reply: “of course Mrs. North must know better than I.” And no other words would he speak, save—as Mr. North saw—evasive ones.

They were staying at this time at Sir Nash

Bohun's. In passing through London after the Continental wedding-trip on their way to Whitborough, Sir Nash had invited them to make his house their resting-place. Not until the day following his conversation at the dinner-table had Mr. North an opportunity of questioning his wife ; but, that some false representation, intentionally or otherwise, had been made to him on the subject of her late husband's death, he felt certain. They were alone in her dressing-room. Mrs. North, who had a mass of beautiful, purple-black hair, was standing before the glass, doing something to a portion of it, when her husband suddenly accosted her. He called her by her Christian name in those first married days. It was a very fine one.

"Amanda, you told me, I think, that Major Bohun died of sun-stroke."

"Well ?" she returned carelessly, occupied with her hair.

"But he did not die of sun-stroke. He died of—of something else."

Mr. North had watched women's faces turn to pallor ; but never in his whole life had he seen so livid a look of terror as overspread his wife's. The band of black hair dropped from

her hands : even their very fingers became of a ghastly whiteness.

“ Why, what is the matter ? ” he exclaimed.

She murmured something about a spasm of the heart, a spasm to which she was subject : an excuse, as he saw. Another moment, and she had recovered her composure, and was busy with her hair again.

“ You were asking me something, were you not, Mr. North ? ”

“ About Major Bohun. What was it he died of—if it was not sun-stroke ? ”

“ But it was of sun-stroke,” she said, in a sharp, ringing accent, that would have required but a little more to be a scream. “ What else was there that he should die suddenly of—in India’s burning climate ? He went out in the blaze of the mid-day sun, and was brought home dead ! ”

And nothing more, then or afterwards, did Mr. North learn. Her manner rendered it impossible that he could press the subject. He might have applied to Sir Nash for information, but an instinct prevented his doing so. After all, it did not signify to him what Major Bohun had died of, Mr. North said to himself, and determined to forget the matter.

But that some mystery must have attended Major Bohun's death, some painful circumstances which could blanch his wife's face with sickly terror, remained on Mr. North's mind as a fact not to be contraverted.

Mrs. North effected changes. Almost the very day she was taken home to Whitborough, she let it be known that she should rule with an imperious will. Her husband became a very reed in her hands ; yielding passively to her sway, as if all the spirit he ever owned had gone out of him. Mrs. North professed to hate the very name of trade : that one with whom she was so nearly connected should be in business, brought to her a sense of degradation and a great deal of talk of it. The quiet, modest, comfortable home at Whitborough was at once given up for the more pretentious Manor Hall at Dallory Ham, which happened to be in the market. And they set up there in a style that might have more properly pertained to the lord-lieutenant of the county. Perhaps it was her assumption of grandeur out of doors and in, combined with the haughty, imperious manner, the like of which had never before been seen in the simple neighbourhood, that caused

people to take to call her “Madam.” Or, it might have been to distinguish her in speech from the first Mrs. North.

In proportion as Mrs. North made herself hated and feared by her husband, his children, and the household, so did she become popular with society. It sometimes happens that the more fascination a woman displays to the world, the more unbearable is she in her own house. It was the case here. Madam put on all her attractions when out of doors ; she visited and dressed and dined and spent ; and gave fêtes again at Dallory Hall utterly regardless of expense. Little wonder, was there, that she swayed the neighbourhood.

Not the immediate neighbourhood. With the exception of the Dallory family (and they did not live there always,) there was not a single person she would have visited. Some gentlepeople resided at Dallory Ham ; Mrs. North did not condescend to know any of them. Report ran that, when they left cards on her, on her first coming to the Hall, she had returned them in blank envelopes. People living at a greater distance she made friends with, but not these around her ; and with as many of the county families as would

make friends with her. The pleasantest times were those when she would betake herself off on long visits, to London, or elsewhere : they grew to be looked for.

But the most decided onset made by Mrs. North, was on her husband's business connections. Had Thomas Gass been a chimney-sweep, she could not have treated him with more intense contempt. It was said that if by ill-fortune she met him in the street, she would pick up her skirts with a jerk as she passed him by. Thomas Gass had his share of sense, and pitied his partner far more than he would had that gentleman gone in for hanging instead of second marriage. Mr. Gass was a very wealthy man now ; and had built himself a handsome and comfortable residence in Dallory.

But, as the years went on, he was doomed to furnish food himself to all the gossips within miles. Dallory rose from its couch one fine morning, to hear that Thomas Gass, the confirmed old bachelor, had married his house-keeper. Not one of your "lady-housekeepers," but a useful, good, hard-working damsel, who had passed the first bloom of youth, and had not much of beauty to recom-

mend her. It was a nine days' wonder, nearly a rebellion. Of course, however much the neighbours might solace their feelings by ridiculing him and abusing her, they could not undo the marriage. All that remained to them was, to make the best of it ; and by degrees they wisely did so. The new Mrs. Gass, who had gilded so easily into her honours, shook as easily down in them. She made an excellent wife to her ailing husband—for Thomas Gass had begun to ail before his marriage—she put on no airs of being superior to what she was ; she turned out to be a thoroughly capable woman of business, giving much judicious advice ; she was very good to the sick and suffering, caring for the poor, ready to give a helping hand wheresoever and whensoever it might be needed. In spite of her fine clothes, which sat ludicrously upon her, and of her mode of speech, which she did not attempt to get out of; above all, in spite of their own prejudices, Dallory grew to like and respect Mrs. Gass, and its small gentle-people to admit her to their houses on an equality.

And so, time and years went on, Mr. North withdrawing himself more and more from per-

sonal attendance on the business, which seemed to have grown utterly distasteful to him. His sons had become young men. Edmund was a civil engineer : by profession at least, not much by practice. Never of strong health, given to expensive and idle habits, Edmund North was in general either in trouble abroad, or leading a lazy life at home, his time being much divided between going into causeless passions and writing poetry. Richard was at the works, the mainspring and prop of the business. Mr. Gass had become a confirmed invalid, and could not personally attend ; Mr. North did not. There was only Richard—Dick, as they all called him ; but he was a host in himself. Of far better powers to bring to bear on it than Mr. North had ever possessed, highly educated, of cultivated mind, he was a thorough man of business, and at the same time a finished gentleman. Energetic, persevering, decisive in control, but of courteous and considerate manners to the very lowest, Richard North was loved and respected. He walked through life doing his duty by his fellow-men ; striving to do it to God. He had been tried at home in many ways since his father's second marriage, and borne all

with patient endurance : how he was tried out of home, he alone knew.

For a long while past there had been trouble in the firm, ill-feeling between the two old partners : chiefly because Mr. North put no limit to the sums he drew out for his private account. Poor Mr. North at length confessed that he could not help it : the money was wanted by his wife : though how on earth she contrived to get rid of so much, even with all her extravagance, he could not conceive. Mr. Gass insisted on a separation : John North must withdraw from the firm ; Richard might take his place. Poor Mr. North yielded, meek as any lamb. “Don’t let it go abroad,” he only stipulated, speaking as if he were half heart-broken, which was nothing new ; “I should not like it to be known that I was superseded.” They respected his wishes, and the change was made privately : very few having cognizance that the senior partnership in the firm had passed into the hands of a young man. Thenceforth Mr. North ceased to have control over the business ; in fact, to have any actual connection with it. Dallory suspected it not : Mrs. North had not the faintest idea of it. Richard North signed the

cheques as he had done before, “North and Gass :” and perhaps the bank at Whitborough alone knew that he signed them now as principal.

Richard was the scape-goat now. Mr. North’s need of money, or rather his wife’s, did not cease : the sum arranged to be paid to him as a retiring pension—a very liberal sum, and Mr. Gass grumbled at it—seemed to be as nothing ; it melted in Madam’s hands like so much water. Richard was constantly appealed to by his father ; and responded generously, though it crippled him.

The next change came in the shape of Mr. Gass’s death. The bulk of his property was left to his wife ; a small portion, comparatively speaking, to charities and servants ; two thousand pounds to Richard North. He also bequeathed to his wife his interest in the business, which by the terms of the deed of partnership he had power to do. So that his share of the capital was not drawn out, and the firm remained, actually as well as virtually, North and Gass. People generally supposed that the “North” was Mr. North ; and Madam went into a cold sea of indignation at her husband’s name being put in conjunction with

“that woman’s.” In the years gone by, Mr. North used to have a nice time of it, finding it a difficult matter to steer his course between his partner and Madam, so as to give offence to neither. Madam had never condescended to notice Thomas Gass’s wife in the smallest degree : she took to abuse her now, asking her husband how he could *suffer* himself to be associated with her. Mr. North, when goaded almost beyond bearing, had much ado to keep his tongue from retorting that it was not himself that was associated with her, but Richard.

Mrs. Gass showed her good sense in regard to the partnership, as she did in most things. She declined to interfere actively in the business. Richard North went to her house twice or thrice a week to keep her cognisant of what was going on ; he consulted her opinion on great matters, just as he had used to consult her husband’s. She knew she could trust to him. Ever and anon she would volunteer some advice to himself personally ; which was invariably good. It could not be concealed from her that large sums (exclusively Richard’s) were ever finding their way to the Hall, and for this she took him to task. “Stop it, Mr. Richard,” she said—always as

respectful to him as she used to be in her housekeeping days ; “stop it, sir. Their wants be like a bottomless sack, the more grain you pour into it the more you may. It’s doing them no good ; *no good*, mind. An end must come to it some time, or you’ll be in the workhouse. The longer it goes on, the more difficult it will be to put an end to, and the harder for them.” But Richard, sorely tried between prudence and filial duty, could not bring himself to stop it so easily ; and the thing went on.

We must now go back to Mrs. Cumberland. It was somewhat singular that, the very week Thomas Gass lay dead, she should make her unexpected appearance at Dallory. But so it was. Again a widow, she had come home to settle near her brother Thomas. She arrived just in time to see him put into his coffin. The other brother, William, had been dead for years. Mrs. Gass, who knew all about the estrangement, received her with marked kindness, and heartily offered her a home for the future.

But that was declined. Mrs. Cumberland preferred to have a home of her own, possessing ample means to set up one in a moderate way. She gave a sketch of her past life to

Mrs. Gass. After her marriage with the Reverend George Cumberland, they had remained for some time at his chaplaincy in the Madras presidency ; but his health began to fail, and he exchanged to Australia. Subsequent to that, years later, he obtained a duty in Madeira. Upon his death, which occurred recently, she came to England. Her only son, Oliver Rane, had been sent home at the age of seven, and was placed with a preceptor in London. When the time came for him to choose a profession he fixed on the medical, and qualified himself for it, studying in London, Paris, and Vienna. He passed all the examinations with great credit, including that in the College of Physicians. He next paid a visit to Madeira, remaining three months there with his mother and step-father, and then came home and established himself in London, with money furnished by his mother. But practice does not always come quickly to young beginners, and Oliver Rane found his means dwindling. He had a horror of debt, and wisely decided to keep out of it : taking a situation as assistant, and giving up the expensive house he had entered on. This had just been effected when Mrs. Cumberland re-

turned. For the present she let her son remain as he was : Oliver had all a young man's pride and ambition, and she thought the discipline might do him good.

Mrs. Cumberland took on lease one of the two handsome gothic villas at the neck of the Ham, and established herself in it ; with Jelly for a waiting-maid, and two other servants for the work. This necessitated the spending the whole of her income, which was a very fair one. A portion of it would die with her, the rest was willed to her son Oliver.

In the old days when she was Fanny Gass, and Mr. North, plain John North—Jack with his friends—they were intimate as elder brother and young sister. If Mrs. Cumberland expected this agreeable state of affairs to be resumed, she was destined to find herself mistaken. Madam set her scornful face utterly against Mrs. Cumberland : just as she had against others. It did not matter. Mrs. Cumberland simply pitied the underbred woman : her health was very delicate, and she did not intend to visit any one. The gentle-people of the neighbourhood called upon her ; she returned the call, and there the friendship ended. When invitations first came in, she

wrote a refusal, explaining clearly and courteously why she was obliged to do so—that her health did not allow her to visit. If she and Mr. North met each other, as by chance happened, they would linger in conversation, and be happy in the reminiscences of the past days.

Mrs. Cumberland had thus lived on in quiet retirement for some time, when the medical man who had the practice of Dallory Ham, and some of that of Dallory, died suddenly. She saw what an excellent opportunity it would be for her son to establish himself, if he would but take up general practice, and she sent a summons for him. When Oliver arrived in answer to it, he entered into the prospect warmly ; left his mother to make arrangements, and returned to London, to compass his removal. Mrs. Cumberland went to Mr. North, and obtained his ready promise to do what he could to push Oliver. It was equivalent to an assurance of success—for Dallory Hall swayed its 'neighbours—and Mrs. Cumberland did not hesitate to secure the other gothic villa adjoining her own (which happened to be vacant), believing the future practice would justify it. In a week's

time Oliver Rane came down and took possession.

But Fate was against him. Dr. Rane said treachery. A young fellow whom he knew in London had told a medical friend—a Mr. Alexander—of this good practice that had fallen in at Dallory, and that Rane was thinking to secure it for himself. What was Dr. Rane's mortification when, upon arriving at the week's end at Dallory Ham to take possession, he found another there before him. Mr. Alexander had come the previous day, was already established in an opposite house, and had called on everybody. Dr. Rane went over and reproached him with treachery—they had not previously been personally acquainted. Mr. Alexander received the charge with surprise; he declared that the field was as open for him as for Dr. Rane—that if he had not thought so, nothing would have induced him to enter for it. He spoke his true sentiments, for he was a straightforward man. An agent in Whitborough had also written up to tell him of this opening; he came to look at it, and decided to try it. The priority, the right to monopolise it, was no more Dr. Rane's, he urged, than it was his. Dr.

Rane took a different view, and said so : but contention would not help the matter now, and he could only yield to circumstances. So each held to his right in apparent amicability, and Dallory got two doctors instead of one ; secret rivals from henceforth.

Not for a moment did Oliver Rane think Mr. Alexander could long hold out against him, as he had secured, through his mother, the favour of Dallory Hall. Alas, a very short while showed him that this was a mistake : Dallory Hall turned round upon him, and was doing what it could to push his rival. Mrs. Cumberland went to Mr. North, seeking an explanation. He could only avow the truth—that his wife, who was both master and mistress, had set her face against Oliver, and was recommending Alexander. “John, you promised me,” urged Mrs. Cumberland. “I know I did, and I’d keep to it if I could,” was Mr. North’s dismal answer—“but nobody can hold out against her.” “Why should she have taken this dislike to Oliver ?” rejoined Mrs. Cumberland. “Heaven knows ; a caprice, I suppose. She sets herself against people without reason : she has never taken to either Richard or Bessy ; and only a little

to Edmund. If I can do anything for Oliver under the rose, I'll do it: my will's good to help him, Fanny, in remembrance of our friendship of the old days."

Mrs. Cumberland took home news of her non-success to Oliver. As to Madam, she simply ignored him, throwing her patronage into the scale of his rival. How bitterly the slight sat upon his heart, none save himself could tell. Mrs. Cumberland resented it; but ah, not as he did. A sense of wrong was ever weighing his spirits down, and he thought Fate was against him. One puzzle remained on his mind unsolved—what he could have done to offend Mrs. North.

Mr. Alexander obtained a fair practice: Dr. Rane barely enough to keep himself. His wants and those of the old servant Phillis were not many. Perhaps the entire fault did not lie with Madam. Alexander had the more open manner and address, and they go a long way with people; he was also an older man, and a married man, and was supposed to carry better experience. A bitter sense of injury rankled ever in Oliver Rane's heart; of injury inflicted by Alexander. Meanwhile he became engaged to Bessy Rane. During an

absence from home of Madam's, the doctor grew intimate at the Hall, and an attachment sprung up between him and Bessy. When Madam came back, his visits had to cease, but he saw Bessy at Mrs. Gass's and elsewhere.

I think that is all of retrospect—and a pretty long one it has been. It brings us down to the present time, to the period of the anonymous letter and Edmund North's death. Exactly two years ago this same month, May, the rival doctors had appeared in Dallory Ham; and now one of them was going to leave it.

Just an incident must be told, bearing on something that has been related, and then the chapter shall close.

The summer of the past year has been a very hot one. A labouring man, working on Mr. North's grounds, suddenly fell; and died on the spot. Mr. Alexander, summoned hastily, thought it must have been sun-stroke. "That is what my father died of," remarked Captain Bohun, who stood with the rest. Mr. North turned to him: "Do you say your father died of sun-stroke, Arthur?" "Yes, sir, that is what he died of, did you not know

it?" was the ready reply. "You are sure of that?" continued Mr. North. "Quite sure, sir," repeated Arthur, turning his dreamy blue eyes full upon his step-father, in all their proud truthfulness.

Mr. North knew that he spoke in the sincerity of belief. Arthur Bohun possessed in an eminent degree the pride of his father's race. That innate, self-conscious sense of superiority that is a sort of safeguard to those who possess it: the *noblesse oblige* feeling that keeps them from wrong-doing. It's true, Arthur Bohun held an exalted view of his birth and family; in so far as that his pride in it equalled that of any man living or dead. He was truthful, generous, honourable; the very opposite in all respects to his mother. Her pride was an assumed pride; a despicable, false, contemptible pride, offensive to those with whom she came in contact. Arthur's was one that you admired in spite of yourself. Of a tarnish to his honour, he could almost have died; to bring disgrace on his own name or on his family, would have caused him to bury his head for ever. Sensitive regardful of other people's feelings, of courteous manner to all, he yet unmistakably

held his own in the world. His father had been just the same ; and in his day was called “Proud Bohun.”

To have asserted that Major Bohun died of sun-stroke, had any doubt of the fact lain on his mind, would have been simply impossible to Arthur Bohun. Therefore, Mr. North saw that, whatever the mystery might be, in regard to the real cause of Major Bohun’s death, Arthur was not cognisant of it.

CHAPTER VI.

LOOKING AT THE FUNERAL.

IN the comfortable dining-room of Mrs. Gass, securely ensconced behind the closed blinds, drawn to-day, sat that lady and a visitor. It was the day of the funeral of Edmund North ; and Mrs. Gass had put on mourning out of respect to the family : a black silk gown and white net cap : it need not be said that the change from finery improved her appearance greatly : she looked, as she herself would have phrased it, genteel to-day. This was her favourite sitting-room ; she rarely used any other : for one thing it gave her the opportunity of seeing the movements of her neighbours. The drawing-room faced the garden at the back : a spacious, beautiful apartment, opening to the smooth green lawn.

The visitor was Mrs. Cumberland. For

once in her life Mrs. Cumberland emerged from her shell of cold indifference and condescended to evince somewhat of the curiosity of ordinary people. She had come to Mrs. Gass's to see the funeral pass : and that lady made much of her, for their meetings were rare. Mrs. Cumberland was in black silk too : but she rarely wore anything else. The two women sat together, talking in a subdued voice of far-back times : not that they had known each other then ; but each had interests in the past. Mrs. Gass was full of respect, never presuming on her elevation ; though they were sisters-in-law, she did not forget that she had once been but a servant in Mrs. Cumberland's family. They had not much in common though, and the topics of conversation exhausted themselves. Mrs. Cumberland was of a silent nature, not at all given to gossip in general. She began to think the waiting long. For the convenience of two mourners, who were coming from a distance, the funeral had been put off until four o'clock.

“ Holidays don’t improve the working class—unless they’ve got the sense to use ‘em as they ought,” observed Mrs. Gass. “ Just

look at them three, ma'am. They've been at the tap—and more shame to 'em! They'd better let Mr. Richard catch his eye upon 'em. Putting theirselves into that state, when he's a-following his brother to the grave!"

She alluded to some men belonging to the Dallory Works, closed to-day. They had taken more than was seemly, and were lounging against the opposite shutters, quarrelling together. Mrs. Gass could bear it no longer; in defiance of appearances, she drew up the blind and dashed open the window.

"Be you three men not ashamed of yourselves? I thought it was you, Dawson! When there's any ill-doing going on, you be safe to be in it. As to you, Thoms, you'll not like to show your face to-morrow. Don't you come to me again, Smith, to beg grace for you of Mr. Richard North."

The men slunk away and disappeared down an entry. Mrs. Gass, in one sense of the word, was their mistress: at any rate, their master's partner. She shut the window and drew down the blind.

"Are the men paid for to-day, or do they lose it?" asked Mrs. Cumberland.

"They're paid, ma'am, of course. It would be very unjust to dock them when the holiday's none of their making. Neither Mr. Richard nor me would like to be unjust."

"And he—Richard—seems to act entirely for his father."

Mrs. Gass coughed. "Mr. North is took up with his garden, and that; he don't care to bother his head about business. It's better in younger hands."

Another pause of silence. Mrs. Cumberland felt weary.

"Is this funeral ever coming?" she exclaimed. "There seems to be some delay."

"'Twas a late hour to fix it for, ma'am. Old Sir what's-his-name wrote word he couldn't be here afore the afternoon; so they put it off to four o'clock for his convenience."

Mrs. Cumberland looked up enquiringly. She did not understand.

"I mean young Bohun's relatives, ma'am. Madam's brother-in-law by her first husband."

"Sir Nash Bohun! Is he coming?"

"Sir Nash; that's the name," remarked Mrs. Gass. "I know when Mr. Richard said it, it put me in mind of grinding the teeth."

"What could have induced them to ask him?" wondered Mrs. Cumberland. "He is no relative."

"It sounds grand to have him, ma'am—and that's all *she* thinks of," returned Mrs. Gass, with slighting allusion to Madam. "Or may be, as it was an uncommon death, they want to make it an uncommon funeral. *I* look upon it as no better than a murder."

"It is very strange about that piece of paper," observed Mrs. Cumberland.

She lowered her voice as she spoke, as if the subject would not bear the broad light of day. Any surprise, greater than what appeared in Mrs. Gass's face at hearing it, could not well be imagined.

"Ma'am! Did he tell you of *that*?"

"Did who tell me?"

"Your son."

They looked questioningly at each other; both unconscious that they were alluding to two totally different circumstances. Cross-purposes are sometimes productive of more ill than straight ones.

It appeared that a night or two subsequent to Edmund North's death, Captain Bohun found in his own desk a sheet of folded note-

paper in an envelope. It contained a few words in Edmund's handwriting, not apparently addressed to anybody in particular, but to the world in general. No date was appended, but the ink looked fresh, as if it had been recently written.

“When the end comes, make no fuss with me, but bury me quietly out of sight.—E. N.”

Captain Bohun, not having the faintest idea of who put it in his desk, or how it came there, carried it to Richard North. Richard showed it to his father. From thence it spread to the house, and to one or two others. Opinions were divided. Mr. North thought his ill-fated son had intended to allude to his own death ; that he must have felt some foreshadowing of it on his spirit. On the contrary, Arthur Bohun and Richard both thought that it was nothing more than one of his scraps of poetry : and this last idea was at length adopted. Arthur Bohun had related the circumstance to Mrs. Cumberland, and it was *this* she meant to speak of to Mrs. Gass. Mrs. Gass, who knew nothing of it, thought, and quite naturally, that she spoke of the piece of paper found on her carpet.

"Of course it *might* have been nothing more than some ideas he had dotted down, poor fellow, connected with his nonsensical poetry," slightlying observed Mrs. Cumberland, who was the first to resume speech : "Richard North and Captain Bohun fully hold to that opinion. I don't. It may be that I am inclined to look always on the sombre side of life ; but I can only think he was alluding to his own death."

"'Twere odd sort of poetry," cried Mrs. Gass, after a pause and a stare.

"The only curious part about it to my mind is, that it should have been found in Arthur Bohun's desk," pursued Mrs. Cumberland, the two being delightfully unconscious still that they were at the cross-purposes. "He says he has not left his desk unlocked at all, that he is aware of—but of course he might have done so. Why Edmund North should have chosen to put it in there, is a mystery."

"What has Captain Bohun's desk got to do with it?" enquired Mrs. Gass, beginning to feel a little at sea.

"The paper was found in Captain Bohun's desk. Though why Edmund North should have hidden it there, remains a mystery."

"Ma'am, whoever told you that, must have been just trying to deceive you. It was found on this carpet."

"Found on this carpet!"

"On this very blessed carpet that we've each got our feet on, ma'am. Right back again the claw of that there centre dining-table."

Again they gazed at each other. Mrs. Cumberland thought her friend must be dreaming.

"But you are quite mistaken, Mrs. Gass. The paper—note, or whatever it was—could not have been on this carpet at all; not in your house, in fact. Captain Bohun discovered it in his desk three days ago, and he has not the slightest notion of how it came there. Mr. North took possession of it, and has never let it go out of his hands since."

"My dear lady, they have been a-mystifying of you," cried Mrs. Gass. "Seeing's believing. The paper was first found by me. By me, ma'am, on this here carpet, and it was the same night that Edmund North was first took; not an hour after the fit."

Mrs. Cumberland made no reply. She was drifting into the conclusion that she had not yet had all the circumstances related to her.

"I picked the paper up myself," continued Mrs. Gass, anxious for the truth, as straightforward people are apt to be. "I kept it safe here for a day and a night, ma'am, waiting to give it back to your son: what I thought was that he had dropped it out of his pocket-book. I never spoke of it to a single soul, and as soon as I had the opportunity I gave it up to him. If it was found in Captain Bohun's desk afterwards, why—Dr. Rane, or somebody else, must have put it there. Ma'am, if, as I conclude, you've heard about the paper from your son, I wonder he did not tell you this."

"What paper was this?" enquired Mrs. Cumberland, a dim notion arising that they could not be talking of the same thing.

"It were the copy of that enonymous letter."

"The copy of the anonymous letter!"

"Leastways, its skeleton."

Rapidly enough came the elucidation now. Without in the least intending to break faith with Dr. Rane, or with her own resolution to hold the matter secret, Mrs. Gass told all she knew, with one exception. Led on by the miserable, but very natural misapprehension

—that Mrs. Cumberland was a depositary of the secret as well as herself—she spoke, and had not the least idea that she was betraying trust. That exception was the hinted suspicion that Madam might have been the writer. Mrs. Cumberland sat listening, still as a statue.

“ And you thought that—this rough copy of the letter—it was Oliver who dropped it ? ” she exclaimed at length, moved out of her usual apathetic calmness.

“ What else could I think ? ” debated Mrs. Gass. “ Dr. Rane had let fall some papers from his pocket-book five minutes before, and I picked this up as soon as he had gone. I’m sure I never so much as gave a thought to Molly Green—though she had come straight from the Hall. Dr. Rane said it might have dropped from her petticoats : but it was a puzzle to me how ; and it’s a puzzle still.”

A keen, enquiring sort of glance shot from the speaker’s eyes with the last words. It was but momentary and not intentional : nevertheless something in it caused Mrs. Cumberland’s heart to quail. A cold hue spread over her grey face ; a cold shade of recollection deadened her heart. Captain

Bohun had told her of Mr. Alexander's theory—that the letter was written to damage him.

"I am sorry I spoke of this, ma'am," struck in Mrs. Gass. "More particular than it should have been you: you'll naturally tell Dr. Rane, and he *will* say I know how to keep secrets—just about as the jackdaws keep theirs. It was your telling of the other paper that misled me."

"I am quite safe," answered Mrs. Cumberland, with a sickly smile. "The matter's nothing to me, that I should get speaking of it again."

"Of course it's not, ma'am. After all—Halloo! here it comes!"

This sudden break was caused by an interrupting sound: the roll of a muffled drum, first advent of the advancing funeral procession. Edmund North had belonged to a local military corps, and was to be attended to the grave with honours. Mrs. Gass drew up the white blind an inch above the short venetian one, which enabled them to look out unseen. The road suddenly became lined with spectators; men, women and children collecting one hardly knew from whence.

The band came first—their instruments in rest; then the muffled drum, on which its bearer struck a note now and again. The hearse and three mourning coaches followed, some private carriages, and the soldiers on foot. And that was all: except a straggling tail of spectators in the rear, with Hepburn the undertaker and his men on either side the black coaches. The hearse was exactly opposite Mrs. Cumberland when the band struck up the Dead March in Saul. Suddenly to her memory flashed a recollection of the morning, but a very few days ago, when Ellen Adair had been playing the same dirge, and it had seemed to grate on Oliver's ear. Her eyes fixed themselves on the hearse as it passed, and she saw in mental vision the cold corpse lying within. In another moment, the music, her son, the dead, and the fatal letter, all seemed to be jumbling together in confusion in her brain: and Mrs. Cumberland sat down white and faint, and three parts senseless. The lady of the house, her eyes glued to the strip of open window, made her comments and suspected nothing of the indisposition.

"Mr. North in the first coach with his white hankecher held to his nose. And well

he may hold it, poor berefted gentleman ! There's Mr. Richard sitting by the side of him. Captain Bohun's on the opposite seat : and—who's the other ? Why ! it's the young one, Sidney North. Then they've sent for him from college, or wherever it is he stays at : Madam's doings, I'll lay. What a little whipper-snapper of a fellow it is!—like nobody but himself. He'll never be half the man his step-brothers be."

Mrs. Gass's tongue ceased with the passing of the coach. In her plenitude of curiosity she did not observe that she had no response. The second coach came in sight, and she began again.

" An old gent, upright as a dart, with snow-white hair and them features called aquiline ! It's a handsome face, if ever I saw one ; his eyes be as blue and as fine as Captain Bohun's. There's a likeness between 'em. It must be his uncle, Sir Nash. A young man sits next him with a white unhealthy face ; and the other two—why, if I don't believe it's the young Dallorys !"

There was no answering comment. Mrs. Gass turned round to see the reason. Her

visitor was sitting back in a chair, an awfully grey shade upon her face and lips.

“My patience! Don’t you feel well, ma’am?”

“I am a little tired, thank you,” replied Mrs. Cumberland, smiling languidly as she roused herself. “Looking out at passing things always fatigues me.”

“Now don’t you stir, ma’am; I’ll tell it off to you,” came the rejoinder, spoken with warm sympathy. “There’s only one coach more. And that have got but two inside of it—which is the doctors from Whitborough,” added Mrs. Gass; who in moments of unwonted excitement, whether of pleasure or pain, was apt to be signally oblivious of the courtesies of life, as conveyed in correct syntax. “I wonder they didn’t invite Mr. Oliver—the first called in to the poor young man—and Alexander. Not thought good enough by Madam, perhaps, to be mixed with all these here dons.”

She looked after the swiftly passing pageantry with lingering admiration. Mrs. Cumberland sat still in the chair and closed her eyes, as if all interest in the funeral—and in

life too, for the matter of that—had passed away.

The procession wound along : through the long straggling village street, past the Dallory Works (a mass of buildings that lay on the left), and so to the church. It was the only church in the parish, inconveniently far for some of the inhabitants. Dallory Ham spoke about building one for itself ; but that honour had not been attained to yet. In a corner of the large churchyard lay Mrs. North, Mr. North's first wife and Edmund's mother. The new grave was dug by her side.

Amidst the spectators, numbers of whom had collected in the burial ground, stood Jelly. Very much no doubt to the astonishment of her mistress, had she seen her. To peep surreptitiously from behind blinds, was one thing ; but to stand openly staring in the churchyard, was another ; and Mrs. Cumberland would assuredly have ordered her away. Jelly had come to it with a cousin of hers, Susan Ketler, the wife of the sick man who was being attended by Dr. Rane. Jelly had curiosity enough for ten ordinary women—which is saying a great deal—and would not have missed the sight for the world.

It was soon over : our burial service is not a long one : and the coaches and mourners moved away again, leaving the field in possession of the mob. There ensued a rush to get a view of the coffin, as yet scarcely sprinkled with earth. Jelly and her friend got close, and the former read the inscription.

"Edmund, son of John North and of Mary his first wife. Died May 3rd, 18—, aged 33."

"I should not have put 'died,' but 'murdered,' if it was me had the writing of it," spoke Mrs. Ketler.

"And so should I, Susan," significantly replied Jelly. "Here! let's get out of this throng."

Jelly, in her loftiness of stature and opinion, was above the throng literally and figuratively : but it was dense and troublesome. Neither death nor funeral had been of an ordinary description ; and others besides the great unwashed were crowding there. The two women elbowed their way out, and passed back along the broad highway to Ketler's house in Dallory. He was one of the best of the North workmen, earning good wages ; and the family lived in comfort.

Ketler was in the parlour, sitting up for the

first time. Under Dr. Rane's skilful treatment, he was getting better rapidly. A little one sat on his knee, held by his able arm ; the rest were around. The children had wanted (as a matter of course) to go out and see the funeral. "No," said their father ; "they might get playing, and that would be unseemly." He was a short, dark, honest-looking man ; a good husband and father. Jelly sat talking for a short while, and then rose to leave.

But she was not allowed to go. To let her depart at that hour of the afternoon without first partaking of tea, would have been a breach in the obligations of hospitality that the well-to-do workpeople of Dallory never wished to hear of. Jelly, all too easily persuaded where sociability was concerned, took off her bonnet to be comfortable, and the tray was brought in, with plates of bread-and-butter.

Cups of beer induce men to a long sitting ; cups of tea, women. Jelly (who drank four) sat on, oblivious of the lapse of time. The chief topic of conversation was the anonymous letter. Jelly found, to her surprise and anger, that the prevailing belief here was, that it had

been written by a clerk named Wilks, who was in the office of Dale, the lawyer, and might have become cognizant of the transaction between his master, Mr. Alexander, and Edmund North.

"Who told you that, Ketler?" sharply demanded Jelly, after a pause, fixing her indignant eyes on the man.

"I can't rightly say who told me," replied Ketler; "it's the talk of the place. Wilks, he denies it out and out; but when he's in his evening cups—and that's not seldom—he does things that next morning he has no recollection of. Doctor Rane laughed at me, though, for saying so: a lawyer knows better than to let private matters get out to his clerks, says the Doctor. But he don't know that Tim Wilks as some of us do."

"Well, I would not say too much about its being Tim Wilks if I were you, Ketler," cried Jelly, in suppressed wrath, brushing the crumbs off her black gown. "You might find yourself in hot water."

And then Ketler suddenly remembered that Wilks was her particular friend, so he turned the subject.

Jelly tore herself away at last, very unwill-

ingly : gossip and tea-drinking formed her idea of an earthly paradise. Night was setting in ; a light, beautiful night, the moon sailing majestically in the sky.

Just past the gates of Dallory Hall, in a bend of the road where the overhanging trees on either side gave it a lonely appearance at night (and by day too, for that matter), no dwelling of any sort being within view or hail, stood a bench on the side path. It was a welcome resting-place to tired wayfarers ; it was no less welcome to wandering lovers in their evening rambles. As Jelly went scuttering on, a faint sound of voices broke upon her ear from this spot, and she stilled her steps instinctively. The chance of pouncing unexpectedly upon a pair, exchanging soft vows, was perfectly delightful to Jelly ; especially if it should happen to be a pair who had no business to exchange them.

Stealing softly along on the side grass, went she, until she came to the turn, and then she looked cautiously round. The bushes projected there and favoured her. To do Jelly justice, it must be affirmed that she had neither malice nor ill-will in her nature ; rather the contrary ; but a little innocent pry-

ing into her neighbours' affairs presented an irresistible temptation. What, then, was her astonishment to see—not a dying swain and his mistress, side by side : but her own mistress, Mrs. Cumberland, seated on the bench in an agony of grief, and Dr. Rane standing with folded arms before her.

Jelly, great at divining probabilities, comprehended the situation easily. Her mistress must have stayed to take tea with Mrs. Gass, and encountered her son in walking home.

To come down upon lovers with a startling reprimand was one thing ; to burst upon her mistress and Dr. Rane would be quite another. Jelly wished she had not gone stealing up like a mouse, and felt inclined to steal back again.

But the attitude and appearance of Mrs. Cumberland riveted her to the spot. Her face, never so grey as now, as seen in the moonlight, dim here, was raised to her son's, its expression one yearning agony ; her hands were lifted as if imploring some boon, or warding off some fear. Jelly's eyes opened to their utmost width, and in her plenitude of

astonishment she failed to catch the purport of the first few low-spoken words.

"I tell you, you are mistaken, mother," said Dr. Rane in answer, *his* voice ringing out clear enough in the still night; though it nevertheless had a hushed tone. "Is it probable? Is it likely? *I* drop the copy of the letter out of my pocket-book! What next will you suppose me capable of?"

"But—Oliver,"—and the voice was raised a little—"how else could it have come upon her carpet?"

"I have my theory about that," he rejoined with decision. "Mother, come to your home: I'll tell you more then. Is this a fitting time or place to have thus attacked me?"

Air, voice, action, were alike sharp with authority, as he bent and took her hand. Mrs. Cumberland, saying some words of "having been surprised into speaking," rose from the bench. Jelly watched them along the road; and then sat down on the bench herself to recover her amazement.

"What on earth does it mean?"

Ah! what did it mean? Jelly was pretty sharp, but she was afraid to give her thoughts their full range. Other steps grew on her

ear. They turned out to be those of Mr. Alexander.

"Is it you, Jelly! Waiting for your sweetheart?"

Jelly rose. "Standing about to look at funerals, and such things, tires one worse than a ten-mile run."

"Then why do you do it?"

"One fool makes many," returned Jelly with composure. "Sir, I'd like to know who wrote that letter."

"It strikes me the letter was written by a woman."

"A woman!" echoed Jelly, with a shriek of genuine surprise. "Good gracious, Mr. Alexander!"

"They are so sharp upon us at times, are women," he continued, smiling. "Men don't attack one another."

"And what woman do you suspect, sir?" cried Jelly, in her insatiable curiosity.

"Ah! there's the rub. I have been speaking of women in general, you see. Perhaps it was you?"

"*Me!*" exclaimed Jelly.

Mr. Alexander laughed. "I was only joking, Jelly. Good night."

But Jelly, sharp Jelly, rather thought he had not been joking, and that the suspicion had slipped out inadvertently.

She went straight home. And when she got there, Mrs. Cumberland was seated by the drawing-room fire, her face calm and still as usual, listening to the low sweet singing of Ellen Adair.

And Oliver Rane had passed in to his own house with his weight of many cares. Half wishing that he could exchange places with Edmund North in Dallory churchyard.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER THE FUNERAL.

THE two guests, Sir Nash Bohun and his son, were departing from Dallory Hall. They had arrived the previous afternoon in time to attend the funeral, had dined and slept, and were now going again. Their coming had originated with Sir Nash. In his sympathy with the calamity—the particulars of which had been written to him by his nephew, Arthur Bohun—Sir Nash had proposed to show his concern and respect for the North family by coming with his son to attend the funeral. The offer was accepted: albeit Mrs. North was not best pleased to receive them. For some cause or other, Madam had never been solicitous to court intimacy with her first husband's brother: when thrown into his society, there was something in her

manner that almost seemed to say she did not feel at ease with him.

Neither at the dinner last night nor at the breakfast this morning, had the master of the house been present: the entertaining of the guests had fallen on Richard North as his father's representative. Captain Bohun was of course with them; also the rest of the family, including Madam. Madam played her part gracefully in a full suit of mourning: black crape elaborately set off with jet. For once in her life she was honest, and did not affect to feel the grief for Edmund that she would have felt for a son.

Sitting disconsolately before the open window of his parlour, was Mr. North. His new black clothes looked too large for him, his slippers were down at heel, his whole air was that of one who seems to have lost interest in the world. It is astonishing how aged, as compared with other moments, men will look in their seasons of abandonment. While we battle with our cares, they spare in a degree the face: but in the abandonment of despair, when all around seems dreary, and we are sick and faint because to fight longer seems impossible, look at the poor sunken face then!

The room was dingy ; it has already been said ; rather long, but narrow ; and it seemed uncared-for. The door opened at the end, the window faced it. The fire-place was in the middle, on the left ; opposite to it an old open secretaire, filled with seeds and papers pertaining to gardening, stood side by side with a closet door. This closet—which was, however, more of a small shut-in passage than a closet—had an opposite door opening to the dining-room. But, if the parlour was in itself dingy, the spacious window and the prospect on which it looked, brightened it. Stretching out before it, broad and large, was the gay parterre of many-coloured flowers, Mr. North's only delight for years past. In the cultivation of these flowers, he had found a refuge, a sort of shelter from the consciousness of disappointment that was ever upon him, from life's daily vexations and petty cares. Heaven is all-merciful, and some counter-balancing interest to grievous and long-continued sorrow is often supplied. “She wants me to give up my garden ; but I should die ; I should die, Dick,” Mr. North said one day imploringly to his son Richard after a dispute with Madam. Such disputes were frequent. And yet—

could it be properly called dispute when the railing and reproach were all on one side? Madam wanted money perpetually; money and money, nothing but money; and when her husband avowed—with far more depreciation than he could have used to any other woman on earth—that he was unable to furnish it, she abused him. “Give up your expensive garden,” was often the burthen of her cry; and in very fear, as it seemed, lest he should have to give it up, he had yielded so far as gradually to reduce his staff of gardeners to two. “On my word, I think it is the garden and its care that keeps life in him,” Richard North had exclaimed in a confidential moment to Mrs. Gass. “Then, Mr. Richard, sir,” was the answer, “let him always have it; you and me can take care of so much as that.” Richard nodded. There were times when circumstances compelled him to entrust home secrets to Mrs. Gass—and he might have had a worse depositary.

Mr. North sat looking at his flowers. He had been sitting there just as he was for the past hour, buried in reflections that were not pleasant, and the morning was getting on.

He thought of his embarrassments—those applications for money from Madam, that he strove to hide from his well-beloved son Richard, and that made the terror of his life. They were apt to come upon him at the most unexpected times, in season and out of season; it seemed to him that he was never free from them; that he could never be sure at any minute she would not come down upon him the next. For the past few days the house had been, so to say, sacred from these carp-ing concerns; even she had respected the sorrow in it; but with this morning, the re-turn to every-day life, business and the world resumed its sway. Mr. North was looked upon as a man perfectly at his ease in money matters; “rolling in wealth,” people would say, as they talked of the handsome portion his two daughters might expect on their wed-ding-day. Local debts, the liabilities of ordi-nary, passing life, were kept punctually paid; Richard saw to that; and perhaps no one in the whole outer world, save Mrs. Gass, sus-ppected the truth and the embarrassment. Mr. North thought of his other son, he who had gone from his view for ever; but the edge of the grief was wearing off, though he

was as eager as ever to find out the writer of the anonymous letter.

But there is a limit to all things—I don't know what would become of some of us if there were not—and the mind cannot dwell for ever upon its own bitterness. Unhappy topics, as if in very fatigue, gradually drifted away from Mr. North's mind, and were replaced by loving thoughts of his flowers. How could it be otherwise, when their scent came floating to him through the broad open window in a delicious sea of perfume. The assorted colours charmed the eye, the sweet aroma took captive the senses. Spring flowers, all; and simple ones. It was like a many-hued plain; and further on, beyond the trees that bounded the grounds, a fine view was obtained of the open country over Dallory Ham. Hills and dales, woods and sunny plains, with here and there a gleam of glistening water, lay underneath the distant horizon. Mr. North looked not at the landscape, which was a familiar book to him, but at his flowers. The spring had been continuously cold and wet, retarding the appearance of these early flowers to a very remarkably late period. For the past week or two the weather had been

lovely, hot with a summer brightness, and the flowers seemed to have sprung up all at once. Hyacinths, blue, pink, white, purple ; gilly-flowers in all their rich shades ; white daffodils ; primroses, double and single ; cowslips and polyanthus, and so on. Just as he chose the most simple flowers to cultivate, so he called them all by their more simple and familiar names. Madam turned up her nose at both in contemptuous derision ; sometimes speaking in society of Mr. North's "vulgar cottage garden." A little later the tulip beds would be in bloom. A rare collection, that ; a show for the world to flock to. Great people came boldly inside ; small ones would peep through the shrubs and over the railings, sniffing the sweet scent, and saying the ground was like a many-hued carpet of gorgeous colours. Later on still, the roses would be out, and many thought they were the best show of all. And so the year went on, the flowers replacing each other in their loveliness.

Sadness sat on them to-day : for we see things, you know, in accordance with our own mood, not with their actual brightness. Mr. North rose with a sigh and stood at the open

window. Only that very day week, about this time in the morning, his eldest son had stood there with him side by side. For this was the eighth of May. “Poor fellow!” sighed the father, as he thought of this.

Some one went sauntering down the path that led round from the front of the house, and disappeared beyond the trees: a short, slight young man. Mr. North recognized him for Sidney: Madam’s son as well as his own: and he heaved a sigh almost as profound as the one he gave to the dead Edmund. Sidney North was dreadfully dissipated, and had caused already a great deal of trouble. It was suspected—and with truth—that some of Madam’s superfluous money went to this son. She had brought him up badly, fostering his vanity, and indulging him in everything. By the very way in which he walked now—his head hanging moodily down, his gait slouching, his hands thrust into his pockets, Mr. North judged him to be in some dilemma. He had not wished him to be called home for the funeral; no, though the dead had stood to him as half-brother; but Madam took her own way and wrote for him. “He’ll be a thorn in her side if he lives,” thought the

father, his reflections unconsciously going out to that future time when he himself should be no more.

The door opened, and Richard came in. Mr. North stepped back from the window at which he had been standing.

“Sir Nash and his son are going, sir. You will see them first, will you not?”

“Going! going already. Why—I declare it is past eleven! Bless me! I hope I have not been rude, Dick. Where are my boots?”

The boots stood at hand, ready for him. He put them on in a scuffle, and hid his slippers out of sight in the closet. What with his present grief, and what with a disinclination for society, or, as he called it, company, that had been for some time growing upon him, Mr. North had held aloof from his guests. But he was one of the last men to show incivility, and it suddenly struck him that perhaps he had been guilty of it.

“Dick, I suppose I ought to have been at the breakfast-table.”

“Not at all, my dear father; not at all. Your remaining in privacy is perfectly natural, and I am sure Sir Nash feels it to be so.

Don't disturb yourself : they will come to you here."

Almost as he spoke they came in, Captain Bohun with them. Sir Nash was a very fine man with a proud face, that put you in mind at once of Arthur Bohun's, and of the calmest, pleasantest, most courteous manners possible. His son was not in the least like him ; a studious, sickly man, his health delicate, his dark hair scanty. James Bohun's time was divided between close classical reading, and philanthropic pursuits. He strove to have what he called a mission in life : and to make it one that might do him some service in the next world.

"I am so very sorry ! I had no idea you would be going so soon : I ought to have been with you before this," began Mr. North in a flutter.

But the baronet laid his hands upon him kindly, and calmed the storm. "My good friend, you have done everything that is right and hospitable. I would have stayed a few hours longer with you, but James has to be in London this afternoon to keep an engagement."

"It is an engagement that I cannot well

put off," interposed James Bohun in his small voice that always sounded too weak for a man. "I would not have made it, had I known what was to intervene."

"He has to preside at a public missionary meeting," explained Sir Nash. "It seems to me that he has something or other of the kind on hand every day in the year. I tell him that he is wearing himself out."

"Not every day in the year," spoke the son, as if taking the words literally. "This is the month for such meetings, you know, Sir Nash."

"You do not look strong," observed Mr. North, studying James Bohun.

"Not strong in appearance perhaps, but I'm wiry, Mr. North: and we wiry fellows last the longest. What sweet flowers those are," added Mr. Bohun, stepping to the threshold of the window. "I could not dress myself this morning for looking at them. I longed to put the window open."

"And why did you not?" sensibly asked Mr. North.

"I can't do with the early morning air, sir. I don't accustom myself to it."

"A bit of a valetudinarian," remarked Sir Nash.

“Not at all, father,” answered the son.
“It is well to be cautious.”

“I sleep with my window open, James, summer and winter. Well, well, we all have our different tastes and fancies. And now, my good friend,” added the baronet, taking the hands of Mr. North, “when will you come and see me? A change may do you good.”

“Thank you; not just yet. Thank you all the same, Sir Nash, but—later perhaps,” was Mr. North’s answer. He knew that the kindness was meant, the invitation sincere; and of late he had grown to feel grateful for any shown to him. Nevertheless he thought he should never accept this.

“I will not receive you in that hot, bustling London: it is getting to be a penance to myself to stay there. You shall come to my place in Kent, and be as quiet as you please. You’ve never seen Peveril: it cannot boast the charming flowers that you show, but it is worth seeing. Promise to come.”

“If I can. Later. Thank you, Sir Nash; and I beg you and Mr. Bohun to pardon me for all my seeming discourtesy. It has not been meant as such.”

“No, no.”

They walked through the hall to the door, where Mr. North’s carriage waited. The large, shut-up carriage. Some dim idea was pervading those concerned that to drive to the station in an open dog-cart, would be hardly the right thing for these mourners after the recent funeral.

Sir Nash and his son stepped in, followed by Captain Bohun and Richard North, who would accompany them to the station. As Mr. North turned in-doors again after watching the carriage away, he ran against his daughter Matilda, resplendent in glittering black silk and jet, with endless chains of jet on her head, and neck, and arms, and skirts.

“They have invited you to visit them, have they not, papa?”

“They have invited me—yes. But I shall be none the nearer going, Matilda.”

“Then I wish you would, for I want to go,” she returned, speaking imperiously. “My Uncle Nash asked me. He asked mamma, and said would I accompany her: and I should like to go. Do you hear, papa? I should like to go.”

It was all very well for Miss Matilda North to say "My Uncle Nash." Sir Nash was no relation to her whatever : but that he was a baronet, she might have remembered it.

"You and your mamma can go," said Mr. North with animation, as the seductive vision of the house, relieved of Madam's presence for an indefinite period, arose mentally before him.

"But mamma says she shall not go."

"Oh does she?" he cried, his spirits and the vision sinking together. "She'll change her mind perhaps, Matilda. *I* can't do anything in it, you know."

As if to avoid further colloquy, he passed on to his parlour and shut the door sharply. Matilda North turned into the dining-room, her handsome black silk train following her, her discontented look preceding her. Just then Mrs. North came down stairs, a coquettish, fascinating sort of black lace hood on her head, one she was in the habit of wearing in the grounds. Matilda North heard the rustle of the robes, and looked out again.

"Are you going to walk, mamma?"

"I am. Have you anything to say against it?"

"It would be all the same if I had," was the pert answer. Not very often did Matilda North gratuitously beard her mother; but she was in an ill humour: the guests had gone away much sooner than she had expected or wished, and Madam had vexed her.

"That lace hood is not mourning," resumed Miss Matilda North, defiantly viewing Madam from top to toe.

Madam turned the hood and the haughty face it encircled on her presuming daughter. The look was enough in itself; and what she might have said was interrupted by the approach of Bessy.

"Have you any particular orders to give this morning, Madam?" Bessy asked of her step-mother—whom she as often called Madam as Mamma, the latter fond word never meeting with fond response from Mrs. North to *her*.

"If I have I'll give them later," imperiously replied Madam, sweeping out at the hall door.

"What has angered her now?" thought Bessy. "I hope and trust it is nothing connected with papa. He has enough trouble without having to bear ill-temper."

Bessy North was housekeeper. And a fine time she had of it ! Between Madam's capricious orders, issued at all sorts of inconvenient hours, and the natural resentment of the servants, a less meek and patient spirit would have been worried beyond bearing. Bessy made herself the scape-goat ; labouring, both by substantial help and by soothing words, to keep peace in the household. None knew how much Bessy did, or the care that was upon her. Miss Matilda North had never soiled her fingers in her life, never done more than ring the bell with a dash, and issue her imperious orders after the fashion of Madam, her mother. The two half-sisters were a perfect contrast. Certainly they presented such outwardly, as witness this morning : the one not unlike a peacock, her ornamented head thrown up, her extended train trailing, and her odds and ends of gleaming jet ; the other a meek little woman in a black gown of some soft material with a bit of quiet crape upon it, and her smooth hair banded back—for she had put it plain to-day.

On her way to the kitchens, Bessy halted at her father's sitting-room and opened the door quietly. Mr. North was standing against

the window-frame, half inside the room half out of it.

“Can I do anything for you, papa?”

“There’s nothing to do for me, child. What time do we dine to-day, Bessy?” he asked, after a pause.

“I suppose at six. Mrs. North has not given contrary orders.”

“Very well. I’ll have my bit of luncheon in here, child.”

“To be sure. Dear papa, you are not looking well,” she added, advancing to him.

“No? Looks don’t matter much, Bessy, when folks get to be as old as I am. A thought comes over me at odd moments—that it is good to grow ugly, and yellow, and wrinkled. It makes us wish to become young and fair and pleasant to the sight again: and we can only do that through immortality. Through immortality, child.”

Mr. North lifted his hand, the fingers of which had always now a trembling sort of movement in them, to his shrivelled face, as he repeated the concluding words, passing it twice over the weak, scanty brown hair that time and care had left him. Bessy kissed him fondly and quitted the room with a

sigh, one sad thought running through her mind.

“How sadly papa is breaking!”

Mrs. North swept down the broad gravel walk leading from the entrance door, until she came to a path on the left, which led to the covered portion of the grounds. Not covered by any roof; but the trees in places here grew so thick that shade might be had at midday. This part of the grounds was near the dark portion of the Dallory highway already mentioned (where Jelly had surprised her mistress and Oliver Rane in the moonlight the past night), only the boundary hedges being between them. Thickets of shrubs were there; hedges of laurel, privet, sweet-briar; clustering trees, their branches meeting over-head. Dark grottos nestled at ends of walks, covert benches were hidden in corners. It was a sweet spot, affording retirement from the world and shelter from the fierce rays of the burning sun. Madam was fond of frequenting this spot: and all the more so because sundry loop-holes gave her the opportunity of peering out beyond. She could see all who passed to and from the Hall, without being herself seen. One high enclosed walk was

especially liked by her ; ensconced within its shade, quietly resting on one of its rustic seats, she could hear as well as see. Before she had quite gained this walk, however, her son Sidney crossed her path. A young man of twenty now, undersized, insufferably vain, fast, and conceited. His face might be called a “ pretty ” face : his auburn curls were arranged after the models in a hair-dresser’s window ; his very blue unmeaning eyes had no true look in them. Sidney North was like neither father nor mother : like nobody but his own contemptible self. Madam looked upon him as next door to an angel ; he was her well-beloved. There can be no blindness equal to that of a doting mother.

“ My dear, I thought you had gone with them to the station,” she said.

“ Didn’t ask me to go ; Dick and Arthur made room for themselves, not for me,” responded Sidney, taking his pipe from his mouth to speak, and his voice was as consequential as his mother’s.

A frown crossed Madam’s face. Dick and Arthur were rather in the habit of putting Sidney in the shade, and she hated them for it. Arthur was her own son, but she had

never regarded him with any sort of affection.

"I'm going back this afternoon, mamma."

"This afternoon ! No, my boy ; I can't part with you to-day."

"Must," laconically responded Sidney, puffing at his pipe. And Madam had got to learn that it was of no use saying he was to stay if he wanted to go. "How much tin can you let me have ?"

"How much do you want ?"

"As much as you can give me."

His demands for money seemed to be as insatiable as Madam knew her husband found hers. The fact was beginning to give her some concern. Only two weeks ago she had despatched him all she could afford ; and now here he was, asking again. A slight frown crossed her brow.

"Sidney, you spend too much."

"Must do as others do," responded Sidney.

"But, my sweet boy, I can't let you have it. You don't know the trouble it causes."

"Trouble !—with those rich North Works to draw upon !" cried Sidney. "The governor must be putting by mines of wealth."

"I don't think he is, Sidney. He pleads

poverty always ; says we drain him. I suppose it's true."

"Flam ! All old paters cry that. Look at Dick—the loads of gold he must be netting. He gets his equal share, they say ; goes thirds with the other two."

"Who says it ?"

"A fellow told me so yesterday. It's an awful shame that Dick should be a millionaire, and I obliged to beg for every paltry coin I want ! There's not so many years between us."

"Dick has got his footing in at the works, you see," observed Madam. "Let him ! I'd not have *you* degrade yourself to it for the world. He's fit for nothing but work ; been brought up to it ; and we can spend."

"Just so," complacently returned the young man. "And you must shell out liberally for me this afternoon, mamma."

With no further ceremony of adieu or apology, Mr. Sidney North sauntered away. Madam proceeded to her favourite shaded walk, where she kept her eyes looking out on all sides for intruders, friends or enemies. On this occasion she had the satisfaction of being gratified.

Her arms folded over the black lace shawl she wore, its hood gathered on her head, altogether very much after the fashion of a Spanish mantilla, and the gown train with its crape and jet falling in stately folds behind her, Madam had been pacing this retreat for the best part of an hour, when she caught sight, through the interstices of the leaves, of two ladies slowly approaching. The one she recognized at once as Mrs. Cumberland; the other she did not recognize at all. "What a lovely face!" was her involuntary thought.

A young, fair, lovely face. The face of Ellen Adair.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAM'S LISTENING CLOSET.

MANY years before, when the Reverend George Cumberland held his chaplaincy in Madras, there were two friends also there with whom he was intimate—Major Bohun and Mr. Adair. The latter held a civil appointment under government. At that time, Mr. Adair was not married. Later, this gentleman went to Australia : Mr. and Mrs. Cumberland also went there. Mr. Adair had married in the course of time. His wife died, leaving one little child, a daughter : who was despatched to England for her education. Upon its completion, William Adair wrote and begged Mrs. Cumberland to receive her : he thought it probable that he should be returning home ; and if so, it would not be worth while for Ellen to go out to him. Mrs. Cumberland consented,

and the young lady became an inmate of her house at Dallory Ham. Very liberal terms were offered by Mr. Adair : but this was a matter entirely between himself and Mrs. Cumberland.

Holding herself, as she did, so entirely aloof from her neighbours, there was little wonder in Madam's having remained unconscious of the fact that some months ago, nearly twelve now, a young lady had come to reside with Mrs. Cumberland. Part of the time Mrs. Cumberland had been away. Madam had also been away : and when at home her communication with Dallory and Dallory Ham consisted solely in being whirled through its roads in a carriage : no one indoors spoke unnecessarily in her hearing of any gossip connected with those despised places ; and to church she rarely went, for she did not get up in time. And so the sweet girl, who had for some time now been making Arthur Bohun's heart's existence, had never yet been seen or heard of by his mother.

For Mrs. Cumberland to be seen abroad so early was something marvellous ; indeed she was rarely seen abroad at all. On this morn-

ing she came out of her room between eleven and twelve o'clock, dressed for a walk ; and bade Ellen Adair make ready to accompany her. Ellen obeyed, silently wondering. The truth was, Mrs. Cumberland had picked up a very unpleasant doubt the previous day, and would give the whole world to lay it to rest. It was connected with her son. His assurances had partly pacified her, but not quite : and she determined to get a private word with Mr. North. Ellen, walking by her side along the road, supposed they were going into Dallory. Mrs. Cumberland kept close to the hedge for the sake of the shade : as she brushed the bench in passing, where she had sat the past night, a slight shudder took her frame. Ellen did not observe it ; she was revelling in the beauty of the sweet spring day. The gates of Dallory Hall gained, Mrs. Cumberland turned in. Ellen Adair wondered more and more : but Mrs. Cumberland was not one to be questioned at will on any subject.

On, they came, Madam watching with all her eyes. Mrs. Cumberland was in her usual black silk attire, and walked with the slow step of an invalid. Ellen wore a morning

dress of lilac muslin. It needed not the lilac parasol she carried to reflect an additional lovely hue on that most lovely face. A stately, refined girl, as Madam saw, with charming manners, the reverse of pretentious.

But as Madam, fascinated for once in her life, gazed outwards, a certain familiarity in the face dawned upon her senses. That she had seen it before, or one very like it, became a conviction. “Who on earth is she?” murmured the lady to herself—for Madam was by no means stilted in her phrases at leisure moments.

“Are you going to call at the Hall, Mrs. Cumberland?” enquired Ellen, venturing to ask the question at length in her increasing surprise. And every word could be heard distinctly by Madam, for they were nearly close.

“I think so,” was the answer, given in a hesitating tone. “I—I should like to tell Mr. North that I feel for his loss.”

“But is it not early to do so—both in the hour of the day and after the death?” rejoined Ellen, with deprecation.

“For a stranger it would be; for me, no. I and John North were as brother and sister

once. Besides, I have something else to say to him."

Had Miss Adair asked what the something else was—which she would not have presumed to do—Mrs. Cumberland might have replied that she wished again to enlist the Hall's influence on behalf of her son, now that Mr. Alexander was about to leave. A sure indication that it was *not* the real motive that was drawing her to the Hall, for she was one of those reticent women who rarely, if ever, observe open candour even to friends. Suddenly she halted.

"I prefer to go on alone, Ellen. You can sit down and wait for me. There are benches about in the covered walks."

Mrs. Cumberland went forward. Ellen turned back and began to walk towards the entrance gates with the slow, lingering step of one who waits. Mrs. Cumberland had got well on, when she turned and called.

"Ellen."

But Ellen did not hear. She had her face turned the other way.

"Ellen! Ellen Adair!"

A loud call, this, echoing on the warm summer air, echoing on the curious ears covered

by the lace mantilla. Mrs. North gave a quick, sharp start. It looked very like a start of terror.

“Ellen Adair!” she repeated to herself, her hungry eyes, hungry in their fear, flashing out on the beautiful face, to see whether she could track home the resemblance *now*. “Ellen Adair? Good heavens!”

Ellen had turned at once. “Yes, Mrs. Cumberland.”

“Do not go within view of the road, my dear. I don’t care that all the world should know I am making a call at Dallory Hall. Find a bench and sit down, as I bade you.”

Obedient, as it was in her nature to be, the young lady turned promptly into one of the side paths, which brought her within nearer range of Madam’s view. She, Madam, with a face from which every atom of colour had faded, leaving it white as ashes, stood still as a statue, like one confounded.

“I see the likeness; it is to *him*,” she muttered. “Can he have come home?”

Ellen Adair passed out of sight and hearing. Madam, shaking herself from her fear, turned with stealthy steps to seek the house, keeping in the private paths as long as might

be, which was a more circuitous way. Madam intended, unseen, to make a third at the interview between her husband and Mrs. Cumberland. The sight of that girl's face had frightened her. There might be treason in the air.

Mrs. Cumberland was already in Mr. North's parlour. Strolling out amidst his flowers, he had encountered her in the garden, and taken her in through the open window. Madam, arriving a little later, passed through the hall to the dining-room. Rather inopportunely, there sat Bessy, busy with her housekeeping account books.

"Take them elsewhere," said Madam, with an imperious sweep of the hand.

She was not in the habit of giving a reason for any command whatever: let it be reasonable or unreasonable, all to be done was to hear and obey. Bessy gathered her books up in her black apron, and went away, Madam shooting the bolt of the door after her.

Then she stole across the soft Turkey carpet and slipped into the closet already spoken of, that formed a communication (never used as such) between the dining-room and Mr. North's parlour. The door opening to the parlour was

unlatched and had been ever since he put his slippers inside it an hour before. When her eyes became accustomed to the closet's darkness, Madam saw them lying there; she also saw one or two of his old brown gardening coats hanging on the pegs. Against the wall was a narrow table with an unlocked desk upon it, belonging to herself. It was clever of Madam to keep it there. Opening the lid silently, she pulled up a few of its valueless papers, and let them stick out. Of course, if the closet were suddenly entered from the parlour—a most unlikely thing to happen, but Madam was cautious—she was only getting something from her desk. In this manner she had occasionally made an unsuspected third at Richard North's interviews with his father. Letting the lace hood slip off, Madam bent her ear to the crevice of the unlatched door, and stood there listening. She was under the influence of terror still: her lips were drawn back, her face wore the hue of death.

Apparently the ostensible motive of the interview—Mrs. Cumberland's wish to express her sympathy for the blow that had fallen on the Hall—was over; she had probably also

been asking for Mr. North's influence to push her son. The first connected words Madam caught, were these :

"I will do what I can, Mrs. Cumberland. I wished to do it before, as you know. But Mrs. North took a dislike—I mean took a fancy to Alexander."

"You mean, took a dislike to Oliver," corrected Mrs. Cumberland. "In the old days, when you were John North without thought of future grandeur, and I was Fanny Gass, we spoke out freely to each other."

"True," said poor Mr. North. "I've not had such good days since. Ah, what a long while it seems to look back to! I have grown into an old man, Fanny, older in feeling than in years; and you—you wasted the best days of your life in a hot and pestilential climate."

"Pestilential in places and at seasons," corrected Mrs. Cumberland. "My husband was stationed in the beautiful climate of the Blue Mountains, as we familiarly call the region of the Neilgherry Hills. It is pleasant there."

"Ay, I've heard so. Get the cool breezes, and all that."

"People used to come up there from the hot plains to regain their wasted health," con-

tinued Mrs. Cumberland, whose thoughts were apt to wander back to the earlier years of her exile. "Ootacamund is resorted to there, just as the colder sea-side places are, here. But I and Mr. Cumberland were stationary."

"Ootacamund?" repeated Mr. North, struck with the name. "Ootacamund was where my wife's first husband died; Major Bohun."

"No, he did not die there," quietly rejoined Mrs. Cumberland.

"Was it not there? Ah! well, it does not matter. One is apt to confuse these foreign names and places together in the memory."

Mrs. Cumberland made no rejoinder, and there ensued a momentary silence. Madam, who with the mention of the place, Ootacamund, bit her lip almost to bleeding, bent forward, and looked through the opening of the door. She could just see the smallest portion of the cold, calm, grey face, and waited in sickening apprehension of what the next words might be. They came from Mrs. Cumberland and proved an intense relief, for the subject was changed for another.

"I am about to make a request to you, John: I hope you will grant it for our old

friendship's sake. Let me see the anonymous letter that proved so fatal to Edmund—little Neddums, as I and your wife used fondly to call him in his babyhood. Every incident connected with this calamity is to me so full of painful interest!" she continued, as if seeking to apologize for her request. "As I lay awake last night, unable to sleep, it came into my mind that I would ask you to let me see the letter."

"You may see it, and welcome," was Mr. North's ready reply, as he unlocked a drawer in the old secretaire—bureau, he always called it—and handed the paper to her. "I only wish I could show it to some purpose—to somebody who would recognise the handwriting. You won't do that."

Mrs. Cumberland answered by a sickly smile. Her hands trembled as she took the letter, and Mr. North noticed how white her lips had become—as if with some inward suspense or emotion. She studied the letter well, reading it three times over; looking at it critically in all lights. Madam in the closet could have hit her for her inquisitive curiosity.

"You are right, John," she said, with an

unmistakable sigh of relief as she gave the missive back ; " I certainly do not recognise that handwriting. It is like no one's that I ever saw."

" It is a disguised hand, you see," he answered. " No question about that : and accomplished in the cleverest manner."

" Is it true that poor Edmund had been drawing bills in conjunction with Alexander ?"

" Only one. He had drawn a good many I'm afraid during his short lifetime in conjunction with other people, but only one with Alexander—which they got renewed. No blame attaches to Alexander ; not a scrap of it."

" Oliver told me that."

" Ay. I have a notion that poor Edmund did not get into this trouble for his own sake, but to help that young scamp, his brother."

" Which brother ?"

" Which brother !" echoed Mr. North, rather in mockery. " As if you need ask that. There's only one of them who could deserve the epithet, and that's Sidney. An awful scamp he is. He is but twenty years of age, and he is as deep in the ways of a bad world as though he were forty."

"I am very sorry to hear you say it. Whispers go abroad about him, as I daresay you know, but I would rather not have heard them confirmed by you."

"People can't say much too bad of him. We have got Mrs. North to thank for it: it is all owing to the way she has brought him up. When I would have corrected his faults, she stepped between us. Oftentimes have I thought of the enemy that sowed the tares amid the wheat in his neighbour's field."

"The old saying comes home to many of us," observed Mrs. Cumberland with a suppressed sigh, as she rose to leave. "When our children are young they tread upon our toes, but when they get older they tread upon our hearts."

"Ay, ay! Don't go yet," added Mr. North. "It is pleasant in times of sorrow to see an old friend. I have no friends now."

"I must go, John. Ellen Adair is waiting for me; she will find the time long. And I expect it would not be very agreeable to your wife to see me here. Not that I know for why, or what I can have done to her."

"She encourages nobody; nobody of the good old days," was the confidential rejoinder.

"There's no fear of her ; I saw her going off towards the shrubberies—after Master Sidney, I suppose. She takes what she calls her constitutional walks there. They last a couple of hours sometimes."

As Mr. North turned to put the letter into the drawer again, he saw the scrap of poetry that had been found in Arthur Bohun's desk. This he also showed his visitor. He would have kept nothing from her ; she was the only link left to him of the days when he and the world (to him) were alike young. Had Mrs. Cumberland stayed there till night, he would then have thought it too soon for her to go away.

"I will do all I can for your son, Fanny," said Mr. North, as they stood for a moment at the glass doors. "I like Oliver. He is a steady, persevering fellow, and I'll help him on if I can. If I do not, the fault will not lie with me. You understand?" he added, looking at her.

Mrs. Cumberland understood perfectly—that the fault would lie with Madam. She nodded in answer.

"Mr. Alexander is going, John—as you know. Should Oliver succeed in getting the

whole of the practice—and there's nothing to prevent it—he will soon be making a large income. In that case, I suppose he will be asking you to give him something else."

"You mean Bessy. I wish to goodness he had her!" continued Mr. North impulsively; "I do heartily wish it sometimes. She has not a very happy life of it here. Well, well; I hope Oliver will get on with all my heart; tell him so from me, Fanny. He shall have her when he does."

"*Shall he!*" ejaculated Madam from her closet, and in her most scornfully defiant tone—for the conversation had not pleased her.

They went strolling away amid the parterres of flowers, Madam peering after them with angry eyes. She heard her husband tell Mrs. Cumberland to come again; to come in often; whenever she would. Mr. North went on with her down the broad path, after they had lingered some minutes with the sweet flowers. In strolling back alone, who should pounce upon Mr. North from a side path but Madam!

"Was not that woman I saw you with the Cumberland, Mr. North?"

"It was Mrs. Cumberland: my early friend.

She came in to express her sympathy at my loss. I took it as very kind of her, Madam."

"I take it as very insolent," retorted Madam. "She had some girl with her when she came in. Who was it?"

"Some girl!" repeated Mr. North, whose memory was anything but retentive. "Ah yes, I remember: she said her ward was waiting for her."

"Who is her ward?"

"The daughter of a friend whom they knew in India, Madam. In India or Australia; I forget which: George Cumberland was stationed in both places. A charming young lady with a romantic name: Ellen Adair."

Madam toyed with the black lace that shielded her face. "You seem to know her, Mr. North."

"I have seen her in the road; and in coming out of church. The first time I met them was in Dallory, one day last summer, and Mrs. Cumberland told me who she was. That is all I know of her, Madam—as you seem to be curious."

"Is she living at Mrs. Cumberland's?"

"Just now she is. I—I think they said

she was going to be sent out to join her father," added Mr. North, whose impressions were always hazy in matters that did not immediately concern him. "Yes, I'm nearly sure, Madam: to Australia."

"Her father—whoever he may be—is not in Europe then," slightly spoke Madam, stooping to root up mercilessly a handful of blue-bells.

"Her father lives over yonder. That's why the young lady has to go out."

Madam tossed away the rifled flowers and raised her head to its customary haughty height. The danger had passed. "Over yonder" meant, as she knew, some far-off antipodes. She flung aside the girl and the interlude from her recollections, just as ruthlessly as she had flung the blue-bells.

"I want some money, Mr. North."

Mr. North went into a flutter at once. "I—I have none by me, Madam."

"Then give me a cheque."

"Nor cheque either. I don't happen to have a signed cheque in the house, and Richard is gone for the day."

"What have I repeatedly told you—that you must *keep* money by you; and cheques

too," was her stern answer. "Why does Richard sign the cheques always?—Why can't you sign them?"

She had asked the same thing fifty times, and he had never been goaded to give the true answer.

"I have not signed a cheque since Thomas Gass died, except on my own private account, Madam; no, nor for long^{*} before it. My account is over-drawn. I sha'n't have a stiver in the bank until next quarter-day."

"You told me that last week," she said contemptuously. "Draw then upon the firm account."

He shook his head. "The bank would not cash it."

"Why?"

"Because only Richard can sign. Oh dear, this is going over and over the old ground again. You'll wear me out, Madam. When Richard took first acting place at the works, it was judged advisable that he should alone sign the business cheques—for convenience' sake, Madam; for convenience' sake. Gass's hands were crippled with gout; I was here with my flowers."

"I don't care who signs the cheques so that

I get the money ; " she retorted in a rude, rough tone. " You must give me some to-day."

" It is for Sidney ; I know it is for Sidney," spoke Mr. North tremulously. " Madam, you are ruining that lad. For his own sake some check must be put upon him : and therefore I am thankful that to-day I have no money to give."

He took some short hurried steps over the corners of paths and flower-beds, with the last words, and got into his own room. Madam calmly followed. Very sure might he be that she would not allow him to escape her.

Eilen Adair, waiting for Mrs. Cumberland, had *not* felt the time long. Very shortly after she was left alone, the carriage came back from the station, bringing Arthur Bohun : Richard had been left at Whitborough. Captain Bohun got out at the gates, intending to walk up to the house. Ellen saw him come limping along—the halt in his gait was always more visible when he had been sitting for any length of time—and he at the same time caught sight of the bright hues of the lilac dress gleaming through the trees.

Some years back, the detachment com-

manded by Arthur Bohun was quartered in Ireland. One ill-starred night it was called out to suppress some local disturbances, and he got desperately wounded : shot, as was supposed, unto death. That he would never be fit for service again: that his death, though it might be a lingering one, was inevitable; surgeons and friends alike thought. For nearly two years he was looked upon as a dying man: that is, as a man who could not possibly recover. But Time, the great healer, healed him ; and he came out of his long sickness and danger with only a slight limp, more or less perceptible. When walking slowly, or when he took any one's arm, it was not seen at all. Mrs. North (who was proud of her handsome and distinguished son, although she had no love for him,) was wont to tell friends confidentially that he had a bullet in his hip yet—at which Arthur laughed.

The sight of the lilac dress caused him to turn aside. Ellen rose and stood waiting ; her whole being was thrilling with the rapture the meeting brought. He took her hand in his, his face lighting.

“ Is it indeed you, Ellen ! I should as soon have expected to see a fairy here.”

"Mrs. Cumberland has gone to call on Mr. North. She told me to wait for her."

"I have been with Dick to take my uncle and James to the station," spoke Captain Bohun, pitching upon it as something to say, for his tongue was never too fluent when alone with her. "He has been asking me to go and stay with him."

"Sir Nash has ?"

"Yes. Jimmy invites nobody; he is taken up with his missionaries, and that."

"Shall you go ?"

Their eyes met as she put the question.
Go ! away from her !

"I think not," he quietly answered. "Not at present. Miss Bohun's turn must come first: she has been writing for me this long while."

"That's your aunt."

"My aunt. And a good old soul she is. Won't you walk about a little, Ellen ?"

She took the arm he held out, and they paced the covered walks, almost in silence. The May birds were singing, the budding leaves were dancing. Eloquence enough for them: and each might have detected the beating of the other's heart. Madam had her ear glued

to that closet door, and so missed the sight. A sight that would have made her hair stand on end.

Minutes, for lovers, fly on swift wings. When Mrs. Cumberland appeared, it seemed that she had been away no time. Ellen went forward to meet her : and Captain Bohun said he had just come home from the station. Mrs. Cumberland, absorbed in her own cares, complaining of fatigue, took little or no notice of him : he strolled by their side up the Ham. Standing at Mrs. Cumberland's gate for a moment in parting, Oliver Rane came so hastily out of his house that he ran against them.

"Don't push me over, Rane," spoke Arthur Bohun in his lazy but very pleasing manner.

"I beg your pardon. When I am in a hurry I believe I am apt to drive on in a blindfold fashion."

"Is any one ill, Oliver?" questioned his mother.

"Yes. At Mrs. Gass's. I fear it is herself. The man who brought the message did not know."

"You ought to keep a horse," spoke Captain Bohun, as the doctor recommenced his

course. "So much running about must wear out a man's legs."

"Ought!—oughts go for a great deal, don't they?" replied the doctor, looking back. "I ought to be rich enough to keep one but I'm not."

Captain Bohun wished them good day, and they went indoors. Ellen wondered to hear that Mrs. Cumberland was going out again. Feeling uneasy—as she said—on the score of the sudden illness, she took her way to the house of Mrs. Gass, in spite of the fatigue she had been complaining of. A long walk for her at any time. Arrived there she found that lady in perfect health; it was one of her servants to whom Oliver had been summoned. The young woman had scalded badly her hand and arm.

"I was at the Hall this morning, and Mr. North showed me the anonymous letter," Mrs. Cumberland took occasion to say. "It evidently comes from a stranger; a stranger to us. The handwriting is entirely strange."

"So much the better, ma'am," heartily spoke Mrs. Gass. "'Twould be too bad to think it was writ by a friend."

"Oliver thinks it was Madam," pursued

Mrs. Cumberland, dropping her voice. “At least—he has not gone so far as to say *he* thinks it, but that Mr. Alexander does.”

“That’s just the word he gave to me, ma’am. Alexander thought it, he said, but that he himself didn’t know what to think, one way or the other. As well perhaps for us not to talk of it: least said is soonest mended.”

“Of course. But I cannot help recalling a remark once innocently made by Arthur Bohun in my hearing: that he did not know anybody who could imitate different handwritings so well as his mother. Did you”—Mrs. Cumberland looked cautiously round—“observe the girl, Molly Green, take her handkerchief from her pocket while she stood here?”

“I didn’t see her with any handkercher,” was the answer, given after a pause of reflection. “Shouldn’t think the girl’s got one. She put her basket on the sideboard there, to come forward to my geraniums, and she stood stock still, while she looked at ‘em. I don’t say she didn’t touch her pocket; but I never saw her at it.”

“It might have been. These little actions often pass unnoticed. And it is so easy for

any other article to slip up unseen when a handkerchief is drawn out of a pocket," concluded Mrs. Cumberland in a suppressed tone of almost trembling eagerness. Which Mrs. Gass noticed, and did not quite like.

But there's a little something yet to tell of Dallory Hall. When Madam followed her husband through the glass doors into his parlour, an unusually unpleasant scene ensued. For once Mr. North held out resolutely. He had no other resource, for he had not the money to give her, and did not know where to get it. That it was for Sidney, he well believed ; and for that reason only would have denied it to the utmost of his poor feeble strength. Madam flounced out in one of her worst moods. Mrs. Cumberland's visit and the startling sight of Ellen Adair had brought to her unexampled annoyance. As ill-luck had it, she encountered Bessy in the hall, and upon her vented her dreadful temper. The short scene was a violent one. When it was over, the poor girl went shivering and trembling into her father's parlour. He had been standing with the door ajar, shrinking almost as much as Bessy, and utterly powerless to interfere.

“ Oh, child ! if I could but save you from this !” he murmured, as they stood together before the window, and he fondly stroked the soft hair that lay on his breast. “ It’s one of the troubles that are wearing me out, Bessy ; wearing me out before my time.”

He burst into tears ; perhaps her own sobs set him on ; and they cried in concert. Bessy North was patient, meek, enduring ; but meekness and patience can both be tried beyond their strength.

“ Oliver Rane wants you ; you know that, Bessy. If he could see his way clear to keep you, you should go to him to-morrow. Ay ! though your poor brother has just been put into his grave.”

Bessy lifted her head. In these moments of dire emotion, the heart speaks out without reticence.

“ Papa, I would go to Oliver as he is now, and risk it,” she said through her blinding tears. “ I should not be afraid of our getting on : we’d make shift together, until better luck came. He spoke a word of this to me not long ago, but his lips were tied, he said, and he could not press it.”

“ He thought he had not enough for you ?”

"He thought you would not consider it so. *I* should, papa. And I think those who bravely set out to struggle on together, have as much happiness in their shifts and economy as others who begin with a fortune."

"We'll see; we'll see, Bessy. I'd like you to try it, if you are not afraid. I'll talk to Dick. But—mind!—not a word here," he added, glancing round at the door to indicate the precincts of Mrs. North. "We shall have to keep it to ourselves if we'd not get it frustrated. I wonder how much Oliver makes a year."

"Not much; but he is advancing slowly. He has talked to me about it. What keeps one will keep two, papa."

"He'll come into about two hundred a year when his mother dies. And I fear she won't live long, by what she tells me. Poor Fanny! Not that I'd counsel anybody to reckon on dead men's shoes, child. Life's uncertain: he might die before her."

"He would not reckon on anything but his own exertions, papa. He told me a secret—that he is engaged on a medical work, writing it all his spare time. It is quite certain to take, he says, to be popular, and bring him

good returns. Oh! papa, there will be no doubt of our getting on. Let us risk it!"

What a bright, hopeful tone she spoke in—"let us risk it!"—her mild eyes shining, the tears dried on her cheeks. Mr. North caught the glad spirit, and resolved—Dick being willing; sensible Dick—that they should risk it.

CHAPTER IX.

JN LAWYER DALE'S OFFICE.

WHITBOROUGH was a good-sized, bustling town, sending two members to parliament. In the heart of it lived Mr. Dale, the lawyer, who did a little in money lending as well. He was a short stout man, with a red pimply face and no whiskers, nearly bald on the top of his round head ; and he usually attired himself in the attractive costume of a brown tail coat and white neck-cloth.

On this same morning, which had witnessed the departure of Sir Nash Bohun and his son from Dallory Hall, Mr. Dale—known commonly amid his townsfolks as Lawyer Dale—was seated in his office at Whitborough. It was a small room, containing a kind of double desk, at which two people might face each other. The lawyer's place at it was

against the wall, his face to the room ; a clerk sometimes sat, or stood, on the other side when business was pressing. Adjoining this office was one for the clerks, three of whom were kept ; and clients had to come through their room to reach the lawyer's.

Mr. Dale was writing busily. The clock was on the stroke of twelve, and a great deal of the morning's work had to be done yet, when one of the clerks came in ; a tall, thin cadaverous youth with black hair, parted into a flat curl on his forehead.

“Are you at home, sir ?”

“Who is it ?” asked Mr. Dale, growling at the interruption.

“Mr. Richard North.”

“Send him in.”

Richard came in ; a fine looking man in his deep black clothes—the lawyer could not help thinking so. After shaking hands—a ceremony Mr. Dale liked to observe with all his clients, they being agreeable—he came from behind his desk to seat himself in his dwarf elbow-chair of red patent leather, and gave Richard a seat opposite. The room was small, the desk and other furniture large, and

they sat nearly nose to nose. Richard held his hat on his knee.

" You guess no doubt what has brought me here, Mr. Dale. Now that my ill-fated brother is put out of our sight in his last resting-place, I have leisure and inclination to look into the miserable event that sent him to it. I shall spare neither cost nor energy in discovering—if so may be—the traitor."

" You allude to the anonymous letter."

" Yes. And I have come here to ask you to give me all the information you can about it."

" But, my good sir, I have no information to give. I don't possess any."

" I ought to have said information of the attendant circumstances. Let me hear your history of the transaction from beginning to end : and if you can impart to me any hint of the possible writer—that is, if you have formed any private notion of him—I trust you will do so."

Mr. Dale could be a little tricky on occasion ; he was sometimes engaged in transactions that would not have borne the light, and that most certainly he would never have talked of. On the other hand, he could be

honest and truthful where there existed no reason for being the contrary: and this anonymous letter business came under the latter category.

“The transaction was as open and straightforward as could be,” spoke the lawyer—and Richard, a judge of character and countenances, saw he was speaking the truth. “Mr. Edmund North came to me one day some short time ago, wanting me to let him have a hundred pounds on his own security. I didn’t care to do that—I knew about his bill transactions, you see—and I proposed that somebody should join him. Eventually he came with Alexander the surgeon, and the matter was arranged.”

“Do you know for what purpose he wanted the money?”

“For his young brother, Sidney North. A fast young man, that, Mr. Richard,” added the lawyer in a significant tone.

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

“Well, he had got into some secret trouble, and came praying to Mr. Edmund to get him out of it. Whatever foolish ways Edmund North had wasted money in, there’s this consolation remaining to his friends—that the

transaction which eventually sent him to his grave was one of pure kindness," added the lawyer warmly.

"‘ My father has enough trouble, Dale,’ he said to me, ‘ with one thing and another, his life’s about worried out of him ; and I don’t care that he should get to hear of what Master Sidney’s been doing, if it can be kept from him ?’ Yes ; the motive was a good one.”

“ How was it he did not apply to me ?” asked Richard.

“ Well—had you not, just about that time, assisted your brother Edmund in some scrape of his own ?”

Richard North nodded.

“ Just so. He said he had not the face to apply to you so soon again ; should be ashamed of himself. Well, to go on, Mr. Richard North. I gave him the money on the bill ; and when it became due, neither he nor Alexander could meet it : so I agreed to renew. Only one day after that, the anonymous letter found its way to Dallory Hall.”

“ You are sure of that ?”

“ Certain. The bill was renewed on the

30th of April ; here, in this very room. Mr. North got the letter on the 1st of May."

"It was so. By the evening post."

"So that, if the transaction got wind through that renewing, the writer did not lose much time."

"Well now, Mr. Dale, in what way could that transaction have got wind, and who heard of it ?"

"I never spoke of it to a human being," impetuously cried the lawyer, giving his knee a thump with his closed hand. And Richard North felt sure that he had not.

"The transaction, from the beginning, was known only to us three men : Edmund North, the surgeon, and myself. I don't believe either of them mentioned it at all. I know I did not. It's just possible Edmund North, might have told his step-brother Sidney the way he got the money—the young scamp. I beg you pardon, Mr. Richard ; I forgot he was your brother also."

"It would be to Sidney's interest to keep it quiet," casually remarked Richard. "Our men at the works have got a report running amidst them—I know not whence picked up, and I don't think they know—that the writer of the letter was your clerk, Wilks."

"Flam!" contemptuously rejoined the lawyer. "I've heard of that. Why should Wilks trouble his head to write about it? Don't you believe anything so foolish."

"I don't believe it," returned Richard North. "Wilks could have no motive whatever for it, as far as I can see. But I think this—that he may have become cognisant of the affair, and talked of it abroad."

"Not one of my clerks knew anything about it," protested Mr. Dale. "I've got three of 'em : Wilks and two others. You don't suppose, sir, I take them into my confidence in all things."

"But, is it quite impossible that any one of them—say Wilks—could have got to know of it surreptitiously?" urged Richard.

"Wilks has nothing surreptitious about him," said the lawyer. "He is too shallow-pated. A thoroughly useful clerk here, but a man without guile."

"I did not mean to apply the word surreptitious to him personally. I'll change it if you like. Could Wilks, or either of the other two have accidentally learnt this, without your knowledge? Was there a possibility of it? Come, Mr. Dale ; be open with me.

Even if it were so, no blame attaches to you."

"It is just this," answered Mr. Dale, accepting the solicitation to be open—"that I don't see how it was possible for any one of them to have learnt it; while at the same time, I see no other way in which it could have transpired. That's the candid truth."

"But—is it quite impossible they could have learnt it?" urged Richard North, repeating his words.

"It seems impossible to me; but it is just one of those things that one could not take a Bible oath to. I lay awake one night for half-an-hour, turning the puzzle about in my mind. Alexander says he never opened his lips upon it; I know I did not; and poor Edmund North went into his fatal passion thinking Alexander wrote the letter, because he said Alexander alone knew of it; which is a pretty sure proof he had not talked himself."

"Which brings us back to your clerks," remarked Richard North. "They might have overheard a few chance words when the bill was renewed."

"I'm sure the door was shut," debated Mr.

Dale, in a tone as if he were *not* sure, but rather sought to tell himself he was sure. "Only Wilks was in, that morning ; the other two had gone out."

"Rely upon it, that's how it happened, then. The door could not have been quite closed."

"Well, I don't know. I generally shut it myself, with a bang too, when important clients are in here. I confess," honestly added Mr. Dale, "that it's the only loop-hole I can see. If the door was unlatched, Wilks might have heard. I had him in last night, and taxed him with it. He denies it out and out : says that, even if the affair had reached his knowledge, he knows his duty better than to have talked of it."

"I don't doubt that he does, when in his sober senses. But he is not always in them."

"Oh, come, Mr. Richard North, it is not so bad as that."

Richard was silent. If Mr. Dale was satisfied with his clerk and his clerk's discretion, he had no wish to render him otherwise.

"He takes too much now and then, you know, Mr. Dale ; and he may have dropped a word in some enemy's hearing ; who per-

haps caught it up and then wrote the letter. Would you mind my questioning him?"

"He is not here to be questioned, or you might do it and welcome," replied Mr. Dale. "Wilks is lying up to-day. He has not been well for more than a week past; could hardly do his work yesterday."

"I'll take an opportunity of seeing him, then," said Richard. "My father won't rest until the writer of this letter shall be traced; neither, in truth, shall I."

The lawyer said good morning to his visitor, and returned to his desk. But ere he recommenced work, he thought over the chief subject of their conversation. Had the traitor been Wilks, he asked himself. What Richard North had said was perfectly true—that the young man sometimes took too much after work was over. But Mr. Dale had hitherto found no cause to complain of his discretion: and, difficult as any other loophole of suspicion seemed, he finally concluded that he had no cause now.

Meanwhile Richard North walked back to Dallory—it was nearly two miles from Whithorough. Passing his works, he continued his way a little further, to a turning called

North Inlet; in which were some houses, large and small, tenanted chiefly by his work-people. In one of these, a pretty cottage standing back, lodged Timothy Wilks. The landlady was a relative of Wilks's, and as he got his two rooms cheap, he did not mind the walk once a day to and from Whitborough.

"Good morning, Mrs. Green. Is Timothy Wilks in?"

Mrs. Green, an ancient matron in a mob-cap, was on her hands and knees, whitening the door-step. She got up at the salutation, saw it was Richard North, and curtseyed.

"Tim have just crawled out to get a bit o' sunshine, sir. He's very bad to-day. Would you please to walk in, Mr. Richard?"

Here, amidst this colony of his work-people, he was chiefly known as "Mr. Richard." Mrs. Green's husband was time-keeper at the North works.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Richard, as he stepped over the threshold and the bucket to the little parlour.

"Well, sir, I only hope it's not a low-fever; but it looks to me uncommon like it."

"Since when has he been ill?"

"He have been ailing this fortnight past.

The fact is, sir, he *won't* keep steady," she added in a deplored tone. "Once a week he's safe to come home the worse for drink, and that's pay night; and sometimes it's oftener than that. Then for two days afterwards he can't eat; and so it goes on, and he gets as weak as a rat. It's not that he takes much drink; it is that a little upsets him. Some men could take half-a-dozen glasses a'most to his one."

"What a pity it is!" exclaimed Richard.

"He had a regular bout of it a week or so ago," resumed Mrs. Green; who when she was set off on the score of Timothy's misdoings, never knew when to stop. It was so well known to North Inlet, this failing of the young man's, that she might have talked of it in the market-place and not betrayed confidence. "He had been ailing before, as I said, Mr. Richard; off his food, and that; but one night he caught it smartly, and he's been getting ill ever since."

"Caught what smartly?" asked Richard, not understanding North Inlet idioms.

"Why the drink, sir. He came home reeling, and give his head such a bang again the door-post that it knocked him back'ards.

I got him up somehow—Green was out—and on to his bed, and there he went off in a dead faint. I'd no vinegar in the house : if you want a thing in a hurry you're sure to be out of it : so I burnt a feather up his nose and that brought him to. He began to talk all sorts of nonsense then, about doing ‘bills’ whatever that might mean, and old Dale’s money-boxes, running words into one another like mad, so that you couldn’t make top nor tail o’ the sense. I’d never seen him as bad as this, and got a’most frightened.”

She paused to take breath, always short with Mrs. Green. The words “doing bills” struck Richard North. He immediately perceived that hence might have arisen the report (for she had no doubt talked of this publicly) that Timothy Wilks was the traitor. Other listeners could put two and two together as well as he.

“I thought I’d get in the vinegar, in case he went off again,” resumed Mrs. Green, having laid in a fresh stock of breath. “And when I was running round to the shop for it—leastways walking, for I can’t run now—who should I meet, turning out of Ketler’s but Dr. Rane. I stopped to tell him, and he

said he'd look in and see Tim. He's a kind man in sickness, Mr. Richard."

"Did Dr. Rane come?" asked Richard.

"Right off, sir, there and then. When I got back he had put cloths of cold water on Tim's head. And wasn't Tim talking! You might have thought him a show-man at the fair. The doctor wrote something on paper with his pencil and sent me off again to Stevens's the druggist's, and Stevens he gave me a little bottle of white stuff to bring back. The doctor gave Tim some of it in a tea-cup of cold water, and it sent him into a good sleep. But he has never been well, sir, since then: and now I misdoubt me but it will end in low fever."

"Do you remember what night this was?" asked Richard.

"Ay, that I do, sir. For the foolish girls was standing out by twos and threes, making bargains with their sweethearts to go a-maying at morning dawn. I told 'em they'd a deal better stop in-doors to mend their stockings. 'Twas the night afore the First of May, Mr. Richard."

"The evening of the day the bill was renewed," thought Richard. He possessed

the right clue now. If he had entertained any doubt of Wilks before, this set it at rest.

"Did any of the neighbours hear Tim talking?" he asked.

"Not a soul but me and Dr. Rane here, sir. But I b'lieve he had been holding forth to a room full at the Wheatsheaf. They say he was in part gone when he got there. Oh, it does make me so vexed, the ranting way he goes on when the drink's in him. If his poor father and mother could look up from their graves, they'd be fit to shake him in very shame. Drink is the worse curse that's going, Mr. Richard—and poor Tim's weak head won't stand hardly a drop of it."

She had told all she knew. Richard North stepped over the bucket again, remarking that he might meet Tim. Sure enough he did. In taking a cross-cut to the works, he came upon him, leaning against the wooden rails that bordered a piece of waste land. He looked very ill: Richard saw that: a small, slight young man with a mild pleasant countenance and inoffensive manners. His mother had been a cousin of Mrs. Green's, but superior to the Greens in station. Timothy would have held his head considerably above

North Inlet, but for being brought down both in consequence and pocket by these oft-recurring bouts.

Kindly and courteously, but with a tone of resolution not to be mistaken, Richard North entered on his questioning. He did not suspect Wilks of having written the anonymous letter ; he told him this candidly ; but he suspected, nay, knew, that it must have been penned by some one who had gathered certain details from Wilks's tongue. Wilks, weak and ill, acknowledged that the circumstance of the drawing of the bill (or rather the renewing of one) had penetrated to his hearing in Mr. Dale's office ; but he declared that he had not, so far as he knew, repeated it again.

"I'd no more talk of our office business, sir, than I'd write an anonymous letter," said he, much aggrieved. "Mr. Dale never had a more faithful clerk about him than I am."

"I dare say you would not, knowingly," was Richard's rejoinder. "Answer me one question, Wilks. Have you any recollection of haranguing the public at the Wheatsheaf?"

Mr. Wilks's answer to this was, that he had

not harangued the public at the Wheatsheaf. He remembered being at the house quite well, and there had been a good deal of argument in the parlour ; chiefly, he thought, touching the question of whether masters in general ought not to give holiday on the First of May. There had been no particular haranguing on his part, he declared ; and he could take his oath that he never opened his lips there about what had come to his knowledge. One thing he did confess, on being pressed by Richard —that he had no remembrance of quitting the Wheatsheaf, or of how he got home. He retained a faint notion of having seen Dr. Rane's face bending over him later, but could not say whether it was a dream or reality.

Nothing more could be got out of Timothy Wilks. That the man was guiltless of intentional treachery there was as little doubt of as that the treachery had occurred through his tongue. Richard North bent his steps to the Wheatsheaf, to hold conference with Packerton, the landlord of that much-frequented hostelry.

And any information that Packerton could give, he was willing to give ; but it amounted to little. Richard wanted to get at the

names of all who went into the parlour on the night of the 30th of April, during the time that Wilks was there. The landlord told over as many as he could remember ; but said that others might have gone in and out. One man (who looked like a gentleman and sat by Wilks) was a stranger, he said ; he had never seen him before or since. This man got quite friendly with Wilks, and went out with him, propping up his steps. Packerton's son, a smart young fellow of thirteen, going out on an errand, had overtaken them on their way across the waste ground. (In the very path where Richard had but now encountered Wilks.) Wilks was holding on by the railings, the boy said, talking with the other as fast as he could talk, and the other was laughing. Richard North wished he could find out who this man was, and where he might be seen ; for, of all the rest mentioned by the landlord, there was not one at all likely to have taken up the cause and written the anonymous letter. Packerton's opinion was, that Wilks had not spoken of the matter there ; he was then hardly "far enough gone" to have committed the imprudence.

"But I suppose he was when he left you," said Richard.

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid he might have been. He could talk ; but every bit of reason had gone out of him. I never saw anybody but Wilks just like this when they've taken too much."

Again Richard North sought Wilks, and questioned him who this stranger, man or gentleman, was. He might as well have questioned the moon. Wilks had a hazy impression of having been with a tall, thin, strange man ; but where, or when, or how, he knew not.

"I'll ask Rane what sort of a condition Wilks was in when he saw him," thought Richard.

But Richard could not carry out his intentions until night. Business claimed him for the rest of the day, and then he went home to dinner.

Dr. Rane was in his dining-room that night, the white blind drawn before the window, and writing by the light of a shaded candle. Bessy North had said to her father that Oliver was busy with a medical work that he expected good returns from when published. It was so. He spared no labour ; over that, or anything else ; often writing far into the little hours. He was a patient, persevering man :

once give him a fair chance of success, a good start on life's road, and he would be sure to go on to fortune. He said this to himself continually ; and he was not mistaken. But the good chance had not come yet.

The clock was striking eight, when the doctor heard a ring at his door bell, and Phillis appeared, showing in Richard North. A thrill passed through Oliver Rane : perhaps he could not have told why or wherefore.

Richard sat down and began to talk about Wilks, asking what he had to ask, entering into the question generally. Dr. Rane listened in silence.

"I beg your pardon," he suddenly said, remembering his one shaded candle. "I ought to have got more light."

"It's quite light enough for me," replied Richard. "Don't trouble. I'd as soon talk by this light as by a better. To go back to Wilks : Did he say anything about the bill in your hearing, Rane ?"

"Not a word ; not a syllable. Or, if he did, I failed to catch it."

"Old Mother Green says he talked of 'bills,'" said Richard. "That was before you saw him."

"Does she?" carelessly remarked the doctor. "I heard nothing of the kind. There was no coherence whatever in his words, so far as I noticed: one does not pay much attention to the babblings of a drunken man."

"Was he quite beside himself?—quite unconscious of what he said, Rane?"

"Well, I am told that it is the peculiar idiosyncrasy of Wilks to be able to talk and yet to be unconscious: unconscious for all practical purposes, and for recollection afterwards. Otherwise I should not have considered him quite so far gone as that. He talked certainly; a little; seemed to answer me in a mechanical kind of way when I asked him a question, slipping one word into another. If I had tried to understand him, I don't suppose I could. He did not say much; and I was away from him a good deal about the house, looking for water and rags to put on his head."

"Then *you* heard nothing of it, Rane?"

"Absolutely nothing."

The doctor sat, so that the green shade of the candle happened to fall on his face, making it look very pale. Richard North, absorbed

in thoughts about Wilks, could not have told whether the face was in the dark or the light. He spoke next about the stranger who had joined Wilks, saying he wished he could find out who it was.

“A tall thin man, bearing the appearance of a gentleman?” returned Dr. Rane. “Then I think I saw him, and spoke to him.”

“Where?” asked Richard with animation.

“Close by your works. He was looking in through the iron gates. After quitting Green’s cottage, I crossed the waste ground, and saw him standing at the gates, underneath the centre gas-lamp. I had to visit a patient down by the church, and took the near way over the waste ground.”

“You did not recognize him.

“Not at all. He was a stranger to me. As I was passing, he turned round and asked me whether he was going right for Whitborough. I pointed to the high road and told him to keep straight along it. Depend upon it, this was the same man.”

“What could he have been looking in at my gates for?” muttered Richard. “And what—for this is of more consequence—had he been getting out of Wilks?”

"It seems rather curious altogether," remarked Dr. Rane.

"I'll find this man," said Richard, as he got up to say good night; "I must find him. Thank you, Rane."

But, after his departure Oliver Rane did not settle to his work as before. A man, once interrupted, cannot always do so. All he did was to pace the room restlessly with bowed head, like a man in some uneasy dream. The candle burnt lower, the flame got above the shade, throwing its light on his face, showing up its hues and lines and angles. But it was not a bit brighter than when the green shade had cast over it its cadaverous hue.

"Edmund North! Edmund North!"

Did the words in all their piteous, hopeless appeal come from him? Or was it some supernatural cry in the air?

CHAPTER X.

PUT TO HIS CONSCIENCE.

A FINE morning in June. Lovely June ; with its bright blue skies and its summer flowers. Walking about amidst his rose-trees with their clustering blossoms, was Mr. North, a rake in his hand. He fancied he was gardening ; he knew he was trifling. What did it matter ?—his face looked almost happy. The glad sunshine was over-head, and he felt as free as a bird in it.

The anonymous letter, that had caused so much mischief, was passing into a thing of the past. In spite of Richard North's efforts to trace him out, the writer remained undiscovered. Timothy Wilks was the chief sufferer, and bitterly resentful thereupon. To have been openly accused of having sent it by at least six persons out of every dozen acquaintances he met, cankered the mind and

curdled the temper of ill-starred Timothy Wilks. As to the general public, they were beginning to forget the trouble—as it is in the nature of a faithless public to do. Only in the hearts of a few individuals did the sad facts remain in all their rugged sternness ; and of those, one was Jelly.

Poor Mr. North could afford to be happy to-day, and for many days to come. Bessy also. Madam had relieved them of her presence yesterday, and gone careering off to Paris with her daughter. They hoped she might be away for weeks. In the seductive freedom of the home, Richard North had stayed late that morning. Mr. North was just beginning to talk with him, when some one called on business, and Richard shut himself up with the stranger. The morning had gone on ; the interview was prolonged ; but Richard was coming out now. Mr. North put down the rake.

“ Has Wilson gone, Richard ?”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ What did he want ? He has stayed long enough.”

“ Only a little business with me, father,” was Richard’s answer in his dutiful care. It

had not been agreeable business, and Richard wished to spare his father.

“And now for Bessy, sir?” he resumed, as they paced side by side amidst the sweet-scented roses. “You were beginning to speak about her.”

“Yes, I want to talk to you. Bessy would be happier with Rane than she is here, Dick.”

Richard looked serious. He had no sort of objection to his sister’s marrying Oliver Rane: in fact, he regarded it as an event certain to take place, sooner or later, but he did not quite see that the way was clear for it yet.

“I make no doubt of that, father.”

“And I think, Dick, she had better go to him now, while we are at liberty to do as we please at home.”

“Now!” exclaimed Richard.

“Yes; now. That is, before Madam comes back. Poor Edmund is but just put under the sod; but—considering the circumstances—I think the memory of the dead must give place to the welfare of the living.”

“But how about ways and means, sir?”

“Ay, that’s it: how about ways and means. Nothing can be spared from the works at present, I suppose, Dick.”

“Nothing to speak of, sir.”

Mr. North had felt ashamed even to ask the question. In fact, it was more a remark than a question, for he knew as well as Richard did that there was no superfluous money.

“Of course not, Dick. Rane gets just enough to live upon now, and no more. Yesterday, after Madam and Matilda had driven off, I was at the front gates when Rane passed. So he and I got talking about it—about Bessy. He said his income was small now, but that of course it would very considerably augment itself as soon as Alexander should have left. As he and Bessy are willing to try it, I don’t see why they should not, Dick.”

Richard gave no immediate reply. He had a rose in his hand and was looking at it absently, deep in thought. His father continued :

“It’s not as if Rane had no expectations whatever. Two hundred a-year must come to him at his mother’s death. And—Dick—have you any notion how Mrs. Gass’s will is left?”

“Not the least, sir.”

“Oliver Rane is the nearest living relative to her late husband, Mrs. Cumberland excepted. He is Thomas Gass’s own nephew—and all the money was his. It seems to me, Dick, that Mrs. Gass is sure to remember him: perhaps largely.”

“She may.”

“Yes; and I think will. Bessy shall go to him; and be emancipated from her thraldom here.”

“Oliver Rane has got no furniture in his house.”

“He has got some. The dining-room and his bed-room are as handsomely furnished as need be. We can put in a bit more. There’s some things at the Hall that were Bessy’s own mother’s, and she shall have them. They have not been taken much account of here, Dick, amid the grand things that Madam has filled the house with.”

“She’ll make a fuss, though, at their being removed,” remarked Dick.

“Let her,” retorted Mr. North, who could be brave as the best when two or three hundred miles lay between him and Madam. “Those things were your own dear mother’s, Dick; she bought them with her own money

before she married me, and I have always regarded them as heir-looms for Bessy. It's just a few plain solid mahogany things, as good as ever they were. It was our drawing-room furniture in the early days, and it will do for their drawing-room now. When Rane shall be making his six or seven hundred a year, they can buy finer, if they choose. We thought great things of it ; I know that."

Richard smiled. "I remember once when I was a very little fellow, my mother came in and caught me drawing a horse on the centre-table with pen-and-ink. The trouble she had to get the horse out !—and the whipping I got!"

"Poor Dick ! She did not whip often."

"It did me good, sir. I have been scrupulously careful of furniture of all kinds ever since."

"Ah, nothing like the lessons of early childhood for making an impression," spoke Mr. North. "'Spare the rod and spoil the child !' There was never a truer saying than that."

"Then you really intend them to marry at once," spoke Richard, returning to the question.

"I do," said Mr. North, in a more decisive tone than he usually spoke. "They both wish it: and why should I hold out against them? Bessy's thirty this year, you know, Dick: if girls are not wives at that age, they begin to think it hard. It's better to marry tolerably young: a man and woman don't shake down into each other's ways if they come together late in life. You are silent, Dick."

"I was thinking, sir, whether I could not manage a couple of hundred pounds for them from myself."

"You are ever generous, Dick. I don't know what we should all do without you."

"The question is—shall I give it over to them in money, or spend it for them in furniture?"

"In money; in money, Dick," advised Mr. North. "The furniture can be managed; and cash is cash. Spend it in chairs and tables and it seems as if there were nothing tangible to show for it."

Richard smiled. "It strikes me that the argument lies the other way, sir. The chairs and tables are tangible; whereas cash sometimes melts. However, I think it will be

better to do as you advise. Bessy shall have two hundred pounds handed to her after her marriage, and they can do what they consider best with it."

"To be sure ; to be sure, Dick. Let 'em be married ; we'll put no impediment on it. Bessy has a miserable life of it here ; and she'll be thirty on the twenty-ninth of this month. Oliver Rane was thirty the latter end of March."

"Only thirty !" cried Richard. "I think he must be more than that, sir."

"But he's not more," returned Mr. North. "I ought to know ; and so ought you, Dick. Don't you remember they are both in the tontine ? All the children put into that tontine were born in the same year."

"Oh, was it so ? I had forgotten," returned Richard carelessly, for the tontine had never much troubled him. He could just recollect that when they were children he and his brother were wont to tease little Bessy, saying if she lived to be a hundred years old she'd come into a fortune.

"That was an unlucky tontine, Dick," said Mr. North, shaking his head. "Of ten children who were entered for it, only three

remain. The other seven are all dead. Four of them died in the first or second year."

"How came Oliver Rane to be put in the tontine?" asked Richard. "I thought he came to life in India—and lived there for the first few years of his life. The tontine children were all Whitborough children."

"Thomas Gass did that, Richard. When he got news that his sister had this baby—Oliver—he insisted upon putting him into the tontine. It was a sort of salve to Tom Gass's conscience ; that's what I thought : what his sister and the poor baby wanted then was money—not to be put into a useless tontine. Ah, well, Rane has got on without anybody's assistance, and I daresay will flourish in the end."

Richard glanced at his watch ; twelve o'clock ; and increased his pace : a hundred and one things were wanting him at the works. Mr. North was walking with him to the gate.

"Yes, it's all for the best, Dick : they shall come together. And we'll get the wedding comfortably over while Madam's away."

"What has been her motive, sir, for opposing Bessy's engagement to Rane?"

"Motive!" returned Mr. North. "Do you see that white butterfly, Dick, fluttering senselessly about, now up, now down?—as good ask me what *his* motive is, as ask me Madam's. I don't suppose she has any motive—except that she is given to oppose us all."

Richard concluded it was so. Something might lie also in Bessy's patient excellence as a housekeeper: Madam, ever selfish, did not perhaps like to lose her.

As they reached the iron gates, Mrs. Cumberland passed, walking slowly. She looked very ill. Mr. North arrested her, and began to speak of the projected marriage of Oliver and Bessy. Mrs. Cumberland changed colour and looked three parts scared. Unobservant Mr. North saw nothing. Richard did.

"Has Oliver not told you what's afoot?" said the former. "Young men are often shyer on these matters than women."

"It is a very small income for them to begin upon," she observed presently, when Mr. North had said what he had to say—and Richard thought he detected that she had

some private objection to the union. “So very small for Bessy—who has been used to Dallory Hall.”

“It won’t always remain small,” said Mr. North. “His practice will increase when Alexander goes; and he’ll have other money, may be, later. Oh, they’ll get along, Fanny. Young couples like to be sufficiently poor to make struggling upward a pleasure. I dare-say you married upon less.”

“Of course, if you are satisfied,—it must be all right,” murmured Mrs. Cumberland. “You and Bessy.”

She pulled her veil over her gray face, said good morning, and moved away. Not in the direction of Dallory—as she was previously walking—but back to the Ham. Mr. North turned into his grounds again; Richard went after Mrs. Cumberland.

“I beg your pardon,” he said—he was not as familiar with her as his father was—“will you allow me a word. You do not like this proposed marriage. Have you aught to urge against it?”

“Only for Bessy’s sake. I was thinking of her.”

“*Why* for Bessy’s sake?”

There was some slight hesitation in Mrs. Cumberland's answer. She appeared to be pulling her veil straight.

"Their income will be so small. *I* know what a small income is, and therefore I feel for her."

"Is that all your doubt, Mrs. Cumberland? —the smallness of the income?"

"All."

"Then I think, as my father says, you may safely leave the decision with themselves. But—*was* this all?" added Richard : for an idea to the contrary had taken hold of him.

"You have no personal objection to Bessy?"

"Certainly it was all," was Mrs. Cumberland's reply. "As to any personal objection to Bessy, that I could never have. When Oliver first told me they were engaged, I thought how lucky he was to get Bessy North ; I wished them success with all my heart."

"Forgive me, Mrs. Cumberland. Thank you. Good morning."

Reassured, Richard North turned, and strode hastily away in the direction of Dallory. He fancied she had heard Bessy would have no fortune, and was feeling dis-

appointed on her son's account. It struck him that he might as well confirm this ; and he wheeled round.

Mrs. Cumberland had gone on and was already seated on the bench before spoken of, in the shady part of the road. Richard, in a few concise words, entering into no details of any sort, said to her, that his sister would have no marriage portion.

“*That I have long taken as a matter of course ; knowing what the expenses at the Hall must be,*” she answered with a friendly smile. “Bessy is a fortune in herself ; she would make a good wife to any man. Provided they have sufficient for comfort—and I hope Oliver will soon be making that—they can be as happy without wealth as with it, if your sister can only think so. Have you—pardon me for recalling to you what must be an unpleasant topic, Richard—have you yet gained any clue to the writer of that anonymous letter ?”

“Not any. It presents mystery on all sides.”

“Mystery ?”

“As it seems to me. Going over the various attendant circumstances, as I do on

occasion when I get a minute to myself, I try to fit one probability into another, and I cannot compass it. We must trust to time, Mrs. Cumberland. Good morning."

Richard raised his hat, and left her. She sat on with her pain. With her pain. Mrs. Cumberland was as strictly rigid a woman in tenets as in temperament; her code of morality was a severe one. Over and over again had she asked herself whether (it is of no use to mince the matter any longer) Oliver had or had not written that anonymous letter which had killed Edmund North: and she could not answer. But, if he had done it, why then surely he ought not to wed the sister. It would be little less than sin.

Since this secret trouble had been upon her, more than a month now, her face had seemed to have assumed a grayer tinge. How gray it looked now, as she sat on the bench, passers-by saw, and almost started at. One of them was Mr. Alexander. Arresting his quick steps—he always walked as though running a race—he inquired after her health.

"Not any better and not much worse," she answered. "Complaints, such as mine, are always tediously prolonged."

"They are less severe to bear, however, than sharper ones," said the doctor, willing to administer a grain of comfort if he could. "What a lovely day it is! And Madam's off for a couple of months I hear."

"Have the two any connection, Mr. Alexander?"

"I don't know," he said, laughing. "Her presence makes winter at the Hall, and her absence its sunshine. If I had such a wife, I'm not sure that I should think it any sin to give her an over-dose of laudanum some day, out of regard to the general peace. Did you hear of her putting Miss Bessy's wrist out?"

"No."

"She did do it, then. Something sent her into a passion with Miss Bessy; she caught her hand and flung it away so violently that the wrist began to swell. I was sent for to bind it up. Why such women are allowed to live, I can't imagine."

"I suppose because they are not fit to die," said Mrs. Cumberland. "When are you leaving?"

"Sometime in July, I think, or during August. I enter on my new post the first of September, so there's no hurry."

Mrs. Cumberland rose and continued her slow way homewards. Passing her own house, she entered that of her son. Dr. Rane was engaged with a patient, so she went on to the dining-room and waited.

He came in shortly, perhaps thinking it might be another patient, his face bright. It fell a little when he saw his mother. Her visits to him were so exceedingly rare that some instinct whispered him nothing pleasant had brought her there. She rose and faced him.

“Oliver, is it true what I hear—that you are shortly to be married?”

“I suppose it is, mother,” was his answer.

“But—is there no impediment that should bar it?” she asked in a whisper.

“Well—as to waiting, I may wait to the end, and not find the skies rain gold. If Bessy’s friends see no risk in it, it is not for me to see it. At any rate, this will be a more peaceful home for her than the Hall.”

“I am not talking of waiting,—or of gold,—or of risk. Oliver,” she continued solemnly, placing both her hands on his arm, “is there nothing on your mind that ought to bar this marriage? is your conscience at rest? If—

wait and let me speak, my son ; I understand what you would say ; what you have already told me—that you were innocent—and I know that I ought to believe you. But a doubt flashes up in my mind continually, Oliver ; it is not my fault ; truth knows my will is good to bury it for ever. Bear with me a moment ; I must speak. If the death of Edmund North lies at your door, however indirectly it was caused, to make his sister your wife will be a thing altogether wrong ; little less than a sin in the sight of Heaven. I do not accuse you, Oliver ; I suggest this as a possible case ; and now I leave it with you for your own reflection. Oh, my son, believe me—for it seems to me as though I spoke with a prophet's inspiration this day ! If your conscience tells you that you were not innocent, to bring Bessy North home to this roof will be wrong, and I think no blessing will rest upon it.”

She was gone. Before Oliver Rane in his surprise could answer a word, Mrs. Cumberland was gone. Passing swiftly out at the open window, she stepped across the garden and the dwarf wire-fence, and so entered her own home.

CHAPTER XI.

WHERE'S THE RING ?

APPARENTLY Dr. Rane found nothing in his conscience that could present an impediment, and the preparations for the wedding went quietly on. Secretly might almost be the better word. In their dread lest the news should reach Madam in her retreat over the water, and bring her back to stop it, those concerned deemed it well to say nothing ; and no suspicion of what was afloat transpired to the world in general.

Bessy—upon whom, from her isolated position, having no lady about her, the arrangements fell—was desired to fix a day. She named the twenty-ninth of June, her birthday. After July should come in, there was no certainty about Madam's movements ; she might come home, or she might not, and it was necessary that all should be over by that

time, if it was to be gone through in peace. The details of the ceremony were to be of the simplest nature: Edmund North's recent death and the other peculiar attendant circumstances forbidding the usual gaiety. The bridal party would go to church with as little ceremony as they went to service on Sundays, Bessy in a plain silk dress and a plain bonnet. Mr. North would give his daughter away, if he were well enough; if not, Richard. Ellen Adair was to be bridesmaid; Arthur Bohun had offered himself to Dr. Rane as best man. It might be very undutiful, but Arthur enjoyed the stealing a march on Madam as much as the best of them.

Mrs. Cumberland was no doubt satisfied on the score of the scruples she had raised, since she intended to countenance the wedding, and be at church. Dr. Rane and his bride would drive away from the church door to the railway station at Whitborough. The bridal tour was to last one week only: the doctor did not care to be away longer from his patients, and Bessy confessed that she would rather be at home, setting her house in order, than prolonging her stay at small roadside inns in Wales. But for the disconcerting fact

of Madam's being in Paris, Dr. Rane would have liked to take Bessy across the Channel and give her her first glimpse of the French capital. Under Madam's unjust rule, poor Bessy had never gone anywhere : Matilda North had been taken half over the world.

The new household arrangements at Dr. Rane's were to be achieved during their week's absence : the articles of furniture (that Mr. North chose to consider belonged to Bessy) to be taken there from the Hall ; the new carpet, Mrs. Cumberland's present, to be laid down in the drawing-room ; Molly Green to enter as helpmate to Phillis. Surely Madam would not grumble at *that*? Molly Green, going into a temper one day at some oppression of Madam's, had given warning on the spot. Bessy liked the girl, and there could be no harm in engaging her for her own housemaid.

One of those taken into the secret had been Mrs. Gass. Richard, who respected her greatly in spite of her queer grammar, and liked her too, unfolded the news. She received it in silence : a very rare thing for Mrs. Gass to do. Just as it had struck Richard in regard to Mrs. Cumberland, so it struck him

now—that Mrs. Gass did not quite like the tidings.

“ Well, I hope they’ll be happy,” she said at length, breaking the silence, “ and I hope he deserves to be. I hope it with all my heart. Do you think he does, Mr. Richard ?”

“ Rane ? Deserve to be happy ? For all I see, he does. Why should he not ?”

“ I don’t know,” answered Mrs. Gass, searching Richard’s face. “ Oliver Rane is my late husband’s nephew, but he’s three parts a stranger to me, except as a doctor ; for it’s him attends here, you know, sir,—as is natural—and not Alexander. Is he truthful, Mr. Richard ? Is he trustworthy ?”

“ He is, for anything I know to the contrary,” replied Richard North, a little wondering at the turn the conversation was taking. “ If I thought he were not, I should be very sorry to give Bessy to him.”

“ And let us hope that he is, Mr. Richard, and wish ’em joy with all our hearts.”

That a doubt was lying on Mrs. Gass’s mind, in regard to the scrap of paper found in her room, was certain. Being a sensible woman, it could not be but that—when surrounding mists had cleared away—she should see

that the only likely place for it to have dropped from, was Dr. Rane's pocket-book. Molly Green had been subjected to a cross-examination, very cleverly conducted, as Mrs. Gass thought, which left the matter exactly as it was before. But the girl's surprise was so genuine, at supposing any receipt for making plum-pudding (for that's how Mrs. Gass put it) could have been dropped by her, that Mrs. Gass's mind could but revert to the pocket-book. How far Oliver Rane was guilty, whether guilty at all, or not, she was quite unable to decide. A small haze of doubt remained on her mind, though she was glad enough to put it from her. One thing struck her as curious, if not suspicious—that from the hour she handed him over the paper to this, Dr. Rane had never once spoken of the subject. It almost seemed to Mrs. Gass that an innocent man would, though it had only been to say, I have found no clue to the writer of that paper.

And if a modicum of the same hazy doubt rose to Richard North during his interview with Mrs. Gass, it was due to her manner. But he was upright himself, unsuspicious as the day. The impression faded again ; and

he came away believing that Mrs. Gass, zealous for the Norths' honours, rather disapproved of the marriage for Bessy, on account of the doctor's poverty.

And so, there was no one to say a word of warning where it might have been effectual, and the day fixed for the wedding drew on. After all, the programme was not strictly carried out, for Mr. North had one of his nervous attacks, and could not go to church.

At five minutes past nine o'clock, in the warm bright June morning, the Dallory Hall carriage drove up to Dallory church. Richard North, his sister, and Arthur Bohun were within it. The forms and etiquette usually observed at weddings were slighted here, else how came Arthur Bohun, the bridegroom's best man, to come to church with the bride? What did it matter? So closely in its wake that the horses nearly clashed with Mr. North's horses, came up the other carriage—which ought to have been the first. In after days, when a strange ending had come to the marriage life of Oliver Rane and his wife, and Oliver was regarded with dread, assailed with reproach, people said the marriage had been the Norths' doings more than his. Any way,

Bessy was first at church, and both were a little late.

But Mr. North was not the only one who failed them ; the other was Mrs. Cumberland. She assigned no reason for absenting herself from the ceremony, excepting a plea that she did not feel equal to it—which her son believed or not, as he pleased. Her new bright dress and bonnet were spread out on the bed ; but she never as much as looked at them : and Ellen Adair found that she and Dr. Rane had to drive to the church alone, in the hired carriage, arriving there almost simultaneously with the other party.

Richard North took his sister up the aisle, the bridegroom following close on their steps. Ellen Adair and Captain Bohun, left behind, walked side by side. Bessy wore a pretty gray silk and plain white bonnet : she had a small bouquet in her hand that the gardener, Williams, had done up for her. Ellen Adair was in a similar dress, and looked altogether lovely. Mr. Lea, the clergyman, stood ready, book in hand. The spectators in the church—for the event had got wind at the last moment, as these events almost always do, and many came—rose up with expectation.

Of all the party, the bridegroom alone seemed to suffer from nervousness. His answering voice was low, his words were jerky. It was the more remarkable, because he was in general so self-contained and calm a man. Bessy, timid and yielding always, spoke with gentle firmness; not a shade of doubt or agitation seemed to cross her. But there occurred a frightful contretemps.

"The ring, if you please," whispered the officiating clergyman to the bridegroom when the part of the service came that the ring was needed.

The ring! Oliver Rane felt in his waistcoat pocket, and went into a spasm of consternation. The ring was not there. He must have left it on his dressing-table. The little golden symbol had been wrapped in a bit of white tissue paper, and he certainly remembered putting it into his waistcoat pocket. It was as certainly not there now: and he supposed he must have put it out again.

"I have not got the ring!" he exclaimed hurriedly.

To keep a marriage ceremony waiting in the middle, while a messenger ran a mile off to

get the ring and then ran a mile back again, was a thing that had never been heard of by the clergyman or any other of the scared individuals around him. What was to be done ? It was suggested that perhaps somebody present could furnish a ring that might suffice. Ellen Adair, standing in her beauty behind the bride, gently laid down the glove and bouquet she was holding, took off her own glove, and gave Oliver Rane a plain gold ring from her finger : one she always wore there. Arthur Bohun alone knew the ring's history ; the rest had never taken sufficient interest in *her* to enquire it ; perhaps had never noticed that she wore one.

The service proceeded to its end. Had Oliver Rane gone a pilgrimage to all the jewellers' marts in Whitborough, he could not have chosen a more perfectly-fitting wedding-ring than this. When they went into the vestry, Bessy, agitated by the mishap and the emotional position altogether, burst into tears, asking Ellen how *she* came by a wedding-ring.

The history was very simple. It arose—that is, the possession of the ring—through the foolish romance of two young girls. Ellen and one of her schoolfellows named Maria

Warne had formed a sincere and lasting attachment to each other. At the time of parting, when Ellen was leaving school for Mrs. Cumberland's, each had bought a plain gold ring to give the other, over which eternal friendship had been vowed, together with an undertaking to wear the ring always. Alas, for time and change! in less than six months afterwards, Ellen Adair received notice of the death of Maria Warne. The ring had in consequence become really precious to Ellen ; but on this emergency she had not scrupled to part with it.

As they came out of the vestry, Ellen found herself face to face with Jelly. The clerk, and the two women pew-openers, and the sexton, considering themselves privileged people, pressed up where they chose : Jelly, who of course—living with Mrs. Cumberland—could not be at all confounded with the common spectators, chose to press with them. Her face was as long as one and a half, as she caught hold of Miss Adair.

“How could you, Miss Ellen ?” she whispered. “Don’t you know that nothing is more unlucky than for a bride to be married with anybody else’s wedding-ring ?”

"But it was not a wedding-ring, Jelly. Only a plain gold one."

"Anyway it was unlucky for *you*. We have a superstition in these parts, Miss Ellen, that if a maid takes off a ring from her own finger to serve at a pinch for a bride, she'll never be a wife herself. *I'd* not have risked it, Miss."

Ellen laughed gaily, Jelly's dismay was so real and her face so long. But there was no time for more. Richard held out his arm to her; and Oliver Rane was already taking out his bride. Close up against the door stood Mr. North's carriage, into which stepped the bride and bridegroom.

"My shawl! where's the shawl?" asked Bessy, looking round.

She had sat down upon it; and laughed gaily when Oliver drew it out. This shawl—a thin cashmere of quiet colours—was intended to be thrown on ere they reached the station. Her silk dress covered with that, and a black lace veil substituted for the white one on her bonnet, the most susceptible maid or matron who might happen to be travelling, would never take her for a bride.

Arthur Bohun deliberately flung an old

white satin slipper after the carriage—it struck the old coachman's head, and the crowding spectators shouted cheerily. Richard was going to the works. He placed Ellen in the carriage that had brought her.

“Will you pardon me, that I depute Captain Bohun to see you safely home instead of myself, Miss Adair? It is a very busy day at the works, and I must go there. Arthur, will you take charge of this young lady?”

What Ellen answered, she scarcely knew. Captain Bohun got into the carriage. The situation was wholly unexpected: and if their hearts beat a little faster in the tumult of the moment's happiness, Richard at least was unconscious of it.

“It is the first wedding I ever was at,” began Ellen gaily, feeling that she must talk to cover the embarrassment of the position. Both were feeling it: and got as far apart from each other as if they had quarrelled: she in one corner, he in the further one opposite. “Of course it had been arranged that I should go home with Mrs. Cumberland.”

“Is she ill?”

“Dr. Rane thinks it is only nervousness: he said so as we came along. I had to come

with him alone. I am sure the people we passed on the road, who had not heard about Bessy, thought it was *I* who was going to be married to him, they stared into the carriage so."

Ellen laughed as she said it. Arthur Bohun, drinking in draughts of her wondrous beauty, glanced at her meaningly, his blue eyes involuntarily betraying his earnest love.

"It may be your turn next, Ellen."

She blushed vividly, and looked from the window as though she saw something passing. He felt tempted there and then to speak of his love. But he had a large sense of the fitness of the time and place ; and she had been placed for these few minutes under his protection : it seemed like putting him on his honour, as schoolboys say. Besides, he had fully made up his mind not to speak until he saw his way clear to marry.

Ellen Adair brought her beaming face round again. "Jelly is in a terrible way about the ring, foretelling all kinds of ill-luck to everybody concerned, and thankful it did not happen to *her*. Will Bessy keep my ring always, do you think ? Perhaps she'd not be legally married if she gave it me back and took to her own—when it is found ?"

Arthur Bohun's eyes danced a little. "Perhaps not," he replied in the gravest of tones. "I cannot tell what they would have done without it, Ellen."

"I did not tell Bessy one thing, when she asked me about it in the vestry. I will never tell her if I can help it—that Maria Warne is dead. How was it Mr. North did not come?"

"Nervousness too, in my opinion. He said he was ill."

"Why should he be nervous?"

"Lest it should come to his wife's ears—that he had so far countenanced the marriage as to be present at it."

"Can you tell why Mrs. North should set her face against it?"

"No. Unless it is because other people have wished it. I should only say as much to you, though, Ellen: she is my mother."

The implied confidence sounded very precious in her ears. She turned to the window again.

"I hope they will be happy. I think there is no doubt of it. Bessy is very sweet-tempered and gentle."

"He is good-tempered too."

"Yes I think so. I have seen but little of him. There's Mrs. Gass!"

They were passing that lady's house. She sat at the open window; a grand amber gown on, white satin ribbons in her cap. Leaning out, she shook her handkerchief at them in violent greeting, just as though they had been the bride and bridegroom. As Ellen drew back in her corner after bowing, her foot touched something on the carpet at the bottom of the carriage.

"Why! what is this?"

They both stooped at once. It was the wedding-ring enclosed in its bit of tissue paper. Captain Bohun unfolded the paper.

"Dr. Rane must have lost it out of his pocket as we went along," cried Ellen. "He said, you know, that he felt so sure he had put it in. What is to be done with it?"

"Wear it instead of your own until they come back," said Arthur. "Bessy can then take her choice of the two."

Accepting the suggestion without thought of dissent, Ellen took off her right glove, and held out the other hand for the ring. He did not give it. Bending forward, he took her right hand and put it on for her.

“ It fits as well as my own did.”

Their eyes met. He had her hand still, as if trying the fit. Her sweet face was like a damask rose.

“ I trust I may put one on to better purpose some day, Ellen,” came the murmuring, whispered, tremulous words. “ Meanwhile—if Bessy does not claim this, remember that I have placed it on your finger.”

Not another syllable, not another look from either. Captain Bohun sat down in his corner ; Ellen in hers, her hot face bent over the glove she was putting on, and fully believing that the carriage had changed into Paradise.

CHAPTER XII.

PUTTING DOWN THE CARPET.

THE days went on, and Dr. Rane's house was being made ready for the reception of the bride. No time could be lost, as the wedding tour was intended to be so short a one. As Jelly said, They'd be at home before folks could look round. Mrs. Cumberland presented the new carpet for the drawing-room; the furniture, that had been the first Mrs. North's, arrived from Dallory Hall. Molly Green arrived with it, equally to take up her abode in the house of Dr. Rane. The arranging of these things, with the rest of the preparations, was carried on with a considerable deal of bustle and gossip, Jelly being in at the doctor's house continually, and constituting herself chief mistress of the ceremonies. Phillis and Molly Green, with native humility, deferred to her in all things.

It was said in a previous chapter that Jelly was one of those who retained an interest in the anonymous letter. She had a special cause for it. Jelly in her propensity to look into her neighbours' affairs, was given to take up any mysterious cause, and make it hers. Her love of the marvellous was great, her curiosity insatiable. But Jelly's interest in this matter really was a personal one and concerned herself. It was connected with Timothy Wilks.

Amidst Jelly's other qualities and endowments, might be ranked one that took almost the pre-eminence—love of admiration. Jelly could not remember to have been without an “acquaintance” for above a month at a time since the days when she left off pinafores. No sooner did she quarrel with one young man and dismiss him, than she took on another. Dallory wondered that of all her numerous acquaintances she had not got married: but, as Jelly coolly said, to have a suitor at your beck and call was one thing, and to be tied to a husband quite another. So Jelly was Jelly still; and perhaps it might be conceded that the fault was her own. She liked her independence.

The reigning “acquaintance” at this present period happened to be Timothy Wilks. Jelly patronized *him*; *he* was devoted to her. There was a trifling difference in their ages—some ten years probably, and all on Jelly’s side—but that disparity had often happened before. Jelly had distinguished Tim by the honour of taking him to be her young man; and when the damaging whisper fell upon him, that he had probably written the anonymous letter resulting in the death of Edmund North, Jelly resented the aspersion far more than Timothy did. “I’ll find out who did do it if it costs me a year’s wages and six months’ patience,” avowed Jelly to herself in the first burst of indignation.

But Jelly found she could not arrive at that satisfactory result any quicker than other people. It’s true, she possessed a slight clue that they did not, in the few memorable words she had overheard pass that moonlight night between her mistress and Dr. Rane, but they did not serve her. The copy of the letter was said to have dropped out of Dr. Rane’s pocket-book on somebody’s carpet, and he denied that it had so dropped. Neither more nor less could Jelly make of the matter than this:

and she laboured under the disadvantage of not being able to speak of the over-heard words, unless she confessed that she had been a listener. Considering who had been the speakers, Jelly did not choose to do that. From that time until this, a good two months, had the matter wrangled in Jelly's mind ; she had kept her ears wide open and put cautious questions wherever she thought they might avail, and all to no purpose. But in this, the first week of July, Jelly got a slight light thrown on the clue from Molly Green. The very day that damsel arrived at Dr. Rane's as helpmate to Phillis, and Jelly had gone in with her domineering orders, the conversation happened to turn on plum-pudding—Phillis having made a currant-dumpling for dinner, and let the water get into it—and Molly Green dropped a few words which Jelly's pricking ears caught up. They were only to the effect that Mrs. Gass had asked her whether she did not let fall on her carpet a receipt for making plum-pudding, the night of Edmund North's attack ; which receipt, Mrs. Gass had said, might have belonged to Madam, and been brought from the Hall by Molly Green's petticoats. Jelly put a wary

question or two to the girl, and then let the topic pass without comment. That same evening she betook herself to Mrs. Gass, acting craftily. "Where's that paper that was found on your carpet the night Edmund North was taken?" asked Jelly with bold tongue. Upon which Mrs. Gass was seized with astonishment so entire that in the moment's confusion she made one or two inconvenient admissions, just stopping short of the half-suspicion she had entertained of Dr. Rane.

In the days gone by, when Mrs. Gass was a servant herself, Jelly's relatives—really respectable people—had patronized her. Mrs. Gass got promoted to what she was ; but she assumed no fine airs in consequence, as the reader has heard, and she and Jelly had remained very good friends. Vexed with herself for having inadvertently admitted that the paper found *was* the copy of the anonymous letter, Mrs. Gass turned round on Jelly and gave her a good sharp reprimand for taking her unawares, and for trying to pry into what did not concern her. Jelly came away, not very much wiser than she went, but with a spirit of unrest that altogether refused to be soothed.

She dared not pursue the enquiry openly, out of respect to her mistress and Dr. Rane, but she resolved to pump Molly Green. This same Molly was niece to the people with whom Timothy Wilks lodged, and rather more friendly with the latter gentleman than Jelly liked.

On the following morning when Jelly had swallowed her breakfast, she went into the next house with her usual lack of ceremony. Phillis and Molly Green were on their knees laying down the new carpet in the drawing-room, tugging and hammering to the best of their ability, their gowns pinned round their waists, their sleeves stripped to the elbows; Phillis little and old and weak-looking; Molly a comely girl of twenty, with red cheeks.

"Well, you must be two fools!" was Jelly's greeting, after taking in appearances. "As if you could expect to put down a heavy Brussels yourselves! Why didn't you get Turtle's men here? They served the carpet, and they ought to come to put it down."

"They promised to be here at seven o'clock this morning, and now it's nine," mildly responded Phillis, her nice dark eyes raised to Jelly's. "We thought we'd try and do it

ourselves, so as to be able to get the tables and chairs in, and the room finished. Perhaps Turtles have forgot it."

"I'd forget them, I know, if it was me, when I wanted to buy another carpet," said Jelly, tartly.

But, even as she spoke, a vehicle was heard to stop at the gate. Inquisitive Jelly looked from the window, and recognized it for Turtle's. It seemed to contain one or two pieces of new furniture. Phillis did not know that any had been coming, and went out. Molly Green rose from her knees, and stood regarding the carpet. This was Jelly's opportunity.

"Now, then!" she sharply cried, confronting the girl with imperious gesture. "Did you drop that, or did you not, Molly Green?"

Molly Green seemed all abroad at the address—as well she might be. "Drop what?" she asked.

"That plum-pudding receipt on Mrs. Gass's parlour carpet."

"Well, I never!" returned Molly after a pause of surprise. "What is it to you, Jelly, if I did?"

Now the girl only so spoke by way of retort; in a sort of banter. Jelly, hardly believing

her ears, took it to be an admission that she did drop it. And so the two went floundering on, quite at cross-purposes.

"Don't stare at me like that, Molly Green. I want a straight-for'ard answer. Did it drop from your skirts?"

"It didn't drop from my hands. As to staring, it's you that's doing that, Jelly, not me."

"Where had you picked up the receipt from?—Out of Mr. Edmund North's room?"

"Out of Mr. Edmund North's room!" echoed Molly in wonder. "Whatever should have brought me a-doing that?"

"It was the night he was taken ill."

"And if it was! I didn't go a-nigh him."

A frightful thought now came over Jelly, turning her quite faint. What if the girl had gone to her Aunt Green's that night and picked the paper up there? In that case it could not fail to be traced home to Timothy Wilks.

"Did you call in at your aunt's that same evening, Molly Green?"

"Suppose I did?" retorted Molly.

"And how *dare* you call in there, and bring—bring—receipts away with you surreptitious?" shrieked Jelly in her temper.

Molly Green stooped to pick up the hammer, lying at her feet, speaking quietly as she did so. Some noise was beginning to be heard outside, caused by Turtle's men getting a piano into the house, and Phillis talking to them.

"I can't think what you are a-driving at, Jelly. As to calling in at aunt's, I have a right to do it when I'm out, if time allows. Which it had not that night, at any rate, for I never went nowhere but to the druggist's, and Mrs. Gass's. I scuttered all the way to Dallory, and scuttered back again; and I don't think I stopped to speak to a single soul, but Timothy Wilks."

Jelly's spirits, which had been rising, fell again to wrath at the name. "You'd better say you got it from *him*, Molly Green. Don't spare him, poor fellow; whiten yourself."

Molly was beginning to feel just a little wrathful in her turn. Though Jelly was a lady's-maid and superior to herself with her red arms and rough hands, that could not be a reason for attacking her in this way.

"And what if I did get it from him, pray? Come! A plum-pudding perscription's no crime."

"But a copy of an anonymous letter *is*," retorted Jelly, the moment's anger causing her to lose sight of caution. "Don't you try to brazen it out to me, girl."

"WHAT?" cried Molly, staring with all her eyes.

But in the intervening moment Jelly's senses had come back to her. She set herself coolly to remedy the mischief.

"To think that my mind should have run off from the pudding receipt to that letter of poor Mr. Edmund's! It's your fault, Molly Green, bothering my wits out of me! Where *did* you pick up the paper? There. Answer that; and let's end it."

Molly thought it might be as well to end it; she was getting tired of the play: besides, here were Turtle's men coming into the room to finish the carpet.

"I never had the receipt at all, Jelly, and it's not possible it could have dropped from me; that's the blessed truth. After talking to me, just as you've done, and turning me inside out, as one may say, Mrs. Gass as good as confessed that it might have fell out of her own bundle of receipts that she keeps in the sideboard drawer."

Slowly, Jelly arrived at a conviction that Molly Green, in regard to her own non-participation in dropping the paper, must be telling the truth. It did not tend to lessen her wrath.

"Then why on earth have you been keeping up this farce with me? I'll teach you manners with your betters, girl."

"Well, why did you set upon me?" was the good-humoured answer. "There's no such great treason in dropping a plum-pudding paper, even if I had done it—which I didn't. 'Tain't a love-letter. I don't like to be brow-beat for nothing: and it's not your place to do it, Jelly."

Jelly said no more. Little did she suspect that Mr. Richard North, leaning against the door-post of the half-open drawing-room door, while he watched the movements of the men, had heard every syllable of the colloquy. Coming round to see what progress was being made in the house, before he went to the works for the day, it chanced that he arrived at the same time as Turtle's cart. The new piano was a present from himself to Bessy.

Turtle's men leaving the piano in the hall, went into the room to finish the carpet, and

Jelly came out of it. She found her arm touched by Mr. Richard North. He motioned her into the dining-parlour; followed, and closed the door.

"Will you tell me the meaning of what you have just been saying to Molly Green?"

The sudden question—as Jelly acknowledged to herself afterwards—made her creep all over. For once in her life she was dumb.

"I heard all you said, Jelly, happening to be standing accidentally at the door. What was it that was dropped on Mrs. Gass's carpet the night of my brother's illness?"

"It—was—a receipt for making plum-pudding, sir," stammered Jelly, turning a little white.

"I think not, Jelly," replied Richard North, gazing into her eyes with quiet firmness. "You spoke of a copy of an anonymous letter; and I am sure, by your tone, you were then speaking truth. As I have overheard this much, you must give me an explanation."

"I'd have spent a pound out of my pocket, rather than this should have happened," cried Jelly, with much ardour.

" You need not fear to tell me. I am no tattler, as you know."

Had there been only the ghost of a chance to stand out against the command, Jelly would have caught at it. But there was not. She disclosed what she knew: more than she need have done. Warming with her subject, when the narrative had fairly set in—as it was in Jelly's gossiping nature to warm—she told also of the interview she had been a partial witness to between Mrs. Cumberland and the doctor, and the words she had heard them say.

Richard North looked grave — startled. He said very little: only cautioned Jelly never to speak of the subject again to other people.

" I suppose you will be asking Mrs. Gass about it, sir," cried Jelly, as he was turning to leave.

" I shall. And should be thankful to hear from her that it really was nothing more than a receipt for plum-pudding, Jelly."

Jelly's head gave an incredulous toss. " I hope you'll not let her think that I up and told you spontaneous, Mr. Richard. After saying to her that I should never open my

lips about it to living mortal, she'd think I can't keep my word, sir."

"Be at ease, Jelly : she shall not suppose I learnt it by aught but accident."

"And I am glad he knows it, after all!" decided Jelly to herself, as she watched him away up the Ham. "Perhaps he'll now be able to get at the rights and the wrongs."

Richard North walked along, full of tumultuous trouble. It could not be but that he should have caught up a suspicion of Oliver Rane—now his brother-in-law—that he might have been the author of the anonymous letter. How, else, could its copy have dropped from his pocket-book—if, indeed it had so dropped? Jelly had not thrown so much as a shadow of hint upon the doctor ; either she failed to see the obvious inference, or controlled her tongue to caution : but Richard North could put two-and-two together. He went straight to Mrs. Gass's, and found that lady at breakfast in her dining-parlour, with window thrown up to the warm summer air.

"What's it you, Mr. Richard?" she cried, rising to shake hands. "I am a'most ashamed to be found a-breakfasting at this hour ; but

the truth is, I overslept myself: and that idiot of a girl never came to tell me the time. The first part o' the night I got no sleep at all: 't were three o'clock afore I closed my eyes."

"Were you not well?" asked Richard.

"I'd got a touch of my stomach-pain; nothing more. Which is indigestion, Dr. Rane says: and he's about right. Is it a compliment to ask you to take some breakfast, Mr. Richard, sir? Them eggs are fresh, and here's some down-right good tea."

Richard answered that it would be only a compliment; he had breakfasted with his father and Arthur Bohun before leaving home. His eyes ran dreamily over the white damask cloth, as if he were admiring what stood on it; the pretty china, the well-kept silver, the glass with a bunch of fresh roses in it. Mrs. Gass liked to have things nice about her, although people called her vulgar. In reality Richard saw nothing. His mind was absorbed with what he had to ask, and with how he should ask it.

In a pause, made by Mrs. Gass's draining her cup of tea and pushing her plate from her, Richard North bent forward and opened the

communication, speaking in a low and confidential tone.

"I have come to you thus early for a little information, Mrs. Gass. Will you kindly tell me what were the contents of the paper that was found here on your carpet, the night of Edmund's seizure?"

From the look that Mrs. Gass's countenance assumed at the question, it might have been thought that she was about to have a seizure herself. Her eyes grew round, her cheeks and nose red. For a full minute she made no answer.

"What on earth cause have you to ask me that, Mr. Richard? You can't know nothing about it."

"Yes, I can; and do. I know that such a paper was found; I fear it was a copy of the anonymous letter. But I have to come to you to learn particulars."

"My patience!" ejaculated Mrs. Gass. "To think you should have got hold of it at last. Who in the world told you, sir?"

"Jelly. But—"

"Drat that girl!" warmly interposed Mrs. Gass. "Her tongue is as long as from here to yonder."

"But not intentionally, I was about to add. I overheard her say a chance word, and I insisted upon her disclosing to me what she knew. There is no blame due to Jelly, Mrs. Gass."

"I say Yes there is, Mr. Richard. What right has she got to blab out chance words about other folk's business? Let her stick to her own. That tongue of hers is worse than a steam-engine: once set it going, it won't be stopped."

"Well, we will leave Jelly. It may be for the better that I should know this. Tell me all about it, my dear old friend."

Thus adjured, Mrs. Gass spoke; telling the tale from the beginning. Richard listened in silence.

"He denied that it came out of his pocket-book?" was the first remark he made.

"Denied it out and out. And then my thoughts turned naturally to Molly Green; for no other stranger had been in the room but them two. He said perhaps she had brought it in her petticoats from the Hall; but I don't think it could have been. I'm afraid—I'm *afraid*, Mr. Richard—that it must have dropped from his pocket-book."

Their eyes met : each hesitating to speak out the conviction lying at heart. Notwithstanding there had been confidential secrets between them before to-day. Richard was thinking that he ought not to have married Bessy—at least, until it was cleared up.

“ Why did you not tell me, Mrs. Gass ?”

“ It was in my mind to do so—I said a word or two—but then, you see, I *couldn’t* think it was him that writ it,” was her answer. “ Mrs. Cumberland told me she saw the enonymous letter itself, Mr. North showed it her, and that it was not a bit like any handwriting she ever met. Suppose he is innocent—would it have been right for me to come out with a tale, even to you, Mr. Richard, that he might have been guilty ?”

On this point Richard said no more. All the talking in the world now could not undo the marriage, and he was never one to reproach uselessly. Mrs. Gass resumed.

“ If I had spoke ever so, I don’t suppose it would have altered things, Mr. Richard. There was no proof ; and, failing that, you’d not have liked to say anything at all to Miss Bessy. Any way they are man and wife now.”

"I hope—I *hope* he did not write it!" said Richard fervently.

Mrs. Gass gave a sweep with her arm to all the china together, as she bent her earnest red face nearer Richard's.

"Let's remember this much to our comfort, Mr. Richard : if it *was* him, he never thought to harm a hair of your brother's head. He must have writ it to damage Alexander. Oliver Rane has looked upon Alexander as his mortal enemy,—as a man who ought to be kicked,—as a man who did him a right down bad turn and spoilt his prospects,—as a man upon whom it was a'most a duty to be revenged."

"Do you think this?" cried Richard, rather at sea.

"No ; but I say he thinks it. He never meant worse nor better by the letter than to drive Alexander away from the place where, as Rane fancies, he only got a footing by treachery. That is, *if* he writ it : sometimes I think he did, and sometimes I think he didn't."

"What is to be done?"

"Nothing. You can do nothing. You and me must just bury it between us, Mr.

Richard, sir, for Miss Bessy's sake. It would be a nasty thing for her if a whisper of this should go abroad, let him be as innocent as the babe unborn. They are fond of one another, and it would just be a cruelty to have stopped the marriage with *this*. He is a good-intentioned man, and I don't see but what they'll be happy together. Let us hope that he has made his peace with the Lord, and that it won't be visited upon him."

"Amen!" was the mental response of Richard North.

CHAPTER XIII.

COMING HOME.

DASHING up to Dallory Hall in a fiery foam, just a week and a day after the wedding, came Mrs. North. Madam had learnt the news. While she was reposing in all security in Paris, amid a knot of friends who had chosen to be there at that season, Matilda North happened to take up a *Times* newspaper of some two or three days old, and saw the account of the marriage : “Oliver Rane, M.D., of Dallory Ham, to Bessy, daughter of John North, of Dallory Hall, and of Elizabeth, his first wife.” Madam rose up, her face in a flame, and clutched the journal to look : she verily believed Miss Matilda was playing a farce. No : the announcement was there in plain black and white. Making her hasty arrangements to quit the French Capital, she came

thundering home : and arrived the very day that Dr. and Mrs. Rane returned.

A letter had preceded her. A letter of denouncing wrath, that had made her husband shake in his shoes. Poor Mr. North looked tremblingly out for the arrival, caught a glimpse of the carriage and of Madam's face, and slipped out at the back door to the fields. Where he remained wandering about for hours.

So Madam found nobody to receive her. Richard was at the works, Captain Bohun had been out all the afternoon. Nothing increases wrath like the having no object to expend it on ; and Madam, foiled, might have sat for a picture of fury. The passion that had been bubbling up higher and higher all the way from Paris, found no escape at its boiling point.

One of the servants happened to come in her way ; the first housemaid, who had been head over Molly Green. Madam pinned her ; bit her lips for calmness, and then enquired particulars of the wedding with a smooth face.

“ Was it a run-away match, Lake ? ”

“ Goodness, no, Madam ! ” was Lake's answer, who was apt to be free with her tongue,

even to her imperious mistress. “ Things were being got ready for a month beforehand ; and my master would have gone to church to give Miss Bessy away himself, but for not being well. All us servants went to see it.”

Little by little, Madam heard the details. Captain Bohun was best man ; Mr. Richard took out Miss Adair, who was bridesmaid, and looked lovely to behold. The bride and bridegroom drove right away from the church door. Captain Bohun went back in the carriage with Miss Adair ; Mr. Richard went off on foot to the works. Miss Bessy—leastways Mrs. Oliver Rane now—had had some furniture sent to her new home from the Hall, and Molly Green was there as house-maid. That Lake should be glowing with intense gratification at being enabled to tell all this, was only in accordance with frail human nature : she knew what a pill it was for Madam ; and Madam was disliked in the household worse than poison. But Lake was hardly prepared for the ashy tint that spread over Madam’s features, when she came to the part that told of the homeward drive together of her son and Ellen Adair.

The girl was in the midst of her descriptions when Arthur Bohun came in. Madam saw him sauntering lazily up the gravel drive, and swept down in her fine Parisian costume of white-and-black brocaded silk, lappets of lace floating from her hair. They met in the Hall.

“Why! is it you, mother?” cried Arthur, in surprise—for he had no idea the invasion might be expected so soon. “Have you come home?”

He advanced to kiss her. Striving to be as dutiful as she would let him be, he was willing to observe all ordinary relations between mother and son: but of affection there existed none. Mrs. North drew back from the offered embrace, and haughtily motioned him to the drawing-room. Matilda sat there, sullen and listless; she was angry at being dragged summarily from Paris.

“Why did I assist at Bessy’s wedding?” replied Arthur, parrying the attack with light good humour, as he invariably strove to do on these wrathful occasions. “Because I liked it. It was great fun. Especially to see Rane hunting in every pocket for the ring, and turning as red as a salamander.”

“ What business had you to do such a thing ? ” retorted Madam, her face dark with the passion she was suppressing. “ How dared you do it ? ”

“ Do what, Madam ? ”

Madam stamped a little. “ You know without asking, sir : countenance personally the wedding.”

“ Was there any reason why I should not ? Bessy stands to me as a sister ; and I like her. I am glad she is married, and I hope sincerely they’ll have the best of luck always.”

“ I had forbidden the union with Oliver Rane,” stamped Madam. “ Do you hear ? — forbidden it. You knew that as well as she did.”

“ But then, don’t you see, mother mine, you had no particular right to forbid it. If Matilda there took it into her head to marry some knight or other, you would have a voice in the matter, for or against ; but Bessy was responsible to her father only.”

“ Don’t bring my name into your nonsense, Arthur,” struck in Matilda, with a frown.

Madam, looking from one to the other, was biting her lips.

"They had the wedding while you were away that it might be got over quietly," resumed Arthur, in his laughing way, determined not to give in an inch, even though he had to tell a home truth or two. "For my part, mother, I have never understood what possible objection you could have to Rane."

"That is my business," spoke Mrs. North. "I wish he and those Cumberland people were all at the bottom of the sea. How dared you disgrace yourself, Arthur Bohun?"

"Disgrace myself?"

"You did. You, a Bohun, to descend to a companionship with *them*! Fie upon you! And you have been said to inherit your father's pride."

"As I hope I do, in all proper things. I am unable to understand your distinctions, Madam," he added, laughingly. "Rane is as good as Bessy, for all I see. As good as we are."

Madam caught up a hand screen, as if she would have liked to fling it at him. Her hand trembled, with emotion or temper.

"There's some girl living with them. They tell me you went home with her in the carriage!"

Arthur Bohun suddenly turned his back upon them, as if to see who might be coming, for distant footsteps were heard advancing. But for that, Madam might have seen a hot flush illumine his face.

"Well? What else, mother? Of course I took her home—Miss Adair."

"In the face and eyes of Dallory!"

"Certainly. And we had faces and eyes out that morning, I can tell you. It is not every day a Miss North gets married."

"How came *you* to take her?"

"Dick asked me. There was nobody else to ask, you see. Mrs. Gass clapped us going by, as if we had been an election. She had a stiff shining yellow gown on and white bows in her cap."

His suavity was so great, his determination not to be ruffled so evident, that Mrs. North felt three parts foiled. It was not often she attacked Arthur; he always met it in this way, and no satisfaction came of it. She could have struck him as he stood.

"What *is* the true tale about the ring, Arthur?" asked Matilda, in the silence come to by Mrs. North. "Lake says Oliver Rane really lost it."

“Really and truly, Matty.”

“Were they married without a ring?”

“Somebody present produced one,” he replied carelessly, in his invincible dislike to mention Ellen Adair before his mother and sister: a dislike that had ever clung to him. Did it arise from the shy reticence that invariably attends love, this feeling?—or could it have been some foreshadowing, dread instinct of what the future was to bring forth?

“How came Dr. Rane to lose the ring?”

“Carelessness, I suppose. We found it in the carriage, going home. He must have dropped it accidentally.”

“Peace, Matilda!—keep your foolish questions for a fitting time,” stormed Madam. “How dare you turn your back upon me, Arthur? What money has gone out with the girl?”

Arthur turned round to answer. In spite of his careless manner, he was biting his lips with shame and vexation. It was so often he had to blush for his mother.

“I’m sure I don’t know, if you mean with Bessy; it is not my business that I should presume to ask. Here comes Dick: I thought it was his step. You can inquire of him, Madam.”

Richard North looked into the drawing-room, all unconscious of the storm awaiting him. Matilda sat back in an easy chair tapping her foot discontentedly ; Arthur Bohun toyed with a rose at the window ; Madam, standing upright by the beautiful inlaid table, her train sweeping the rich carpet, confronted him.

But there was something about Richard North that instinctively subdued Madam ; she had never domineered over him as she did over her husband and Bessy and Arthur ; and at him she did not rave and rant. Calm always, sufficiently courteous to her, and yet holding his own in self-respect, Richard and Madam seldom came to an issue. But she attacked him now : demanding why this iniquity—the wedding—had been allowed to be enacted.

“ Pardon me, Mrs. North, if I meet your question by another,” calmly spoke Richard. “ You complain of my sister’s marriage as though it were a grievous wrong against yourself. What is the reason ? ”

“ I said it should not take place.”

“ Will you tell me why you oppose it ? ”

“ No. It is sufficient that, to my mind, it

did not present itself as suitable. I have resolutely set my face against Dr. Rane and his statue of a mother, who presumes to call the Master of Dallory Hall John ! And I forbade Bessy to think of him."

"But—pardon me, Mrs. North—Bessy was not bound to obey you. Her father and I saw no cause for objecting to Dr. Rane."

"Was it right, was it honourable, that you should seize upon my absence to marry her in this indecent manner?—before Edmund was cold in his grave?"

"Circumstances guide cases," said Richard. "As for marrying her while you were away, it was done in the interests of peace. Your opposition, had you been at home, would not have prevented the marriage; it was therefore as well to get it over in quietness."

A bold avowal. Richard stood before Madam when he made it, upright as herself. She saw it was useless to contend: and all the abuse in the world would not undo it now.

"What money has gone out with her?"

It was a question that she had no right to put. Richard answered it, however.

"At present, not any. To-morrow I shall

give Rane a cheque for two hundred pounds. Time was, Madam, when I thought my sister would have gone from us with twenty thousand."

"We are not speaking of what was, but of what is," said Madam, an unpleasant sneer on her face. "Mr. North—to hear him speak—cannot spare the two hundred."

"Quite true; Mr. North has it not to spare," said Richard. "It is I who give it to my sister. Drained though we are for money perpetually, I could not, for very shame, suffer Bessy to go to her husband wholly penniless."

"She has not gone penniless," retorted Madam, brazening the thing out. "I hear the Hall has been dismantled for her."

"Oh, mother!" interposed Arthur in a burst of pain.

"Hold your tongue; it is no affair of yours," spoke Mrs. North. "A cart-load of furniture has gone out of the Hall."

"Bessy's own," said Richard. "It was her mother's; and we have always considered it Bessy's. A few poor mahogany things, Madam, that you have never condescended to take notice of, and that never, in point of

fact, have belonged to you. They have gone with Bessy, poor girl ; and I trust Rane will make her a happier home than she has had here."

"I trust they will both be miserable," flashed Madam.

Equable in temper though Richard North was, there are limits to endurance ; he found his anger rising, and quitted the room abruptly. Arthur Bohun went limping after him : in any season of emotion, he was undeniably lame.

"I'd beg your pardon for her, Dick, in all entreaty," he whispered, putting his arm within Richard's, "but that my tongue is tied with shame and humiliation. It was an awful misfortune for you all when your father married her."

"We can but make the best of it, Arthur," was the kindly answer. "It was neither your fault nor mine."

"Where is the good old pater?"

"Hiding somewhere. Not a doubt of it."

"Let us go and find him, Dick. He may be the better for having us with him to-day. If she were not my mother—and upon my word and honour, Richard, I sometimes think

she is not—I'd strap on my armour and do brave battle for him."

The bride and bridegroom were settling down in their house. Bessy, arranging her furniture in her new home, was busy and happy as the summer day was long. Some of the mahogany things were sadly old-fashioned, but the fact never occurred to Bessy. The carpet was bright ; the piano, Richard's present, and a great surprise, was beautiful. It was so kind of him to give her one—she who was but a poor player at best, and had thought of asking Madam to be allowed to have the unused old thing in the old school-room at Dallory Hall. She clung to Richard with tears in her eyes as she kissed and thanked him. He kissed her again, and gave his good wishes for her happiness, but Bessy thought him somewhat out of spirits. Richard North handed over two hundred pounds to them : a most acceptable offering to Dr. Rane.

"Thank you, Richard," he heartily said, grasping his brother-in-law's hand. "I shall be getting on so well shortly as to need no help for my wife's sake or for mine." And Richard knew that he was anticipating the

period when the other doctor should have gone, and the whole practice be in his own hands.

It was on the third or fourth morning after their return, that Dr. Rane, coming home from seeing his patients, met his fellow-surgeon, arm-in-arm with a stranger. Mr. Alexander stopped to introduce him.

"Mr. Seeley, Rane," he said. "My friend and successor."

Had a shot been fired at Dr. Rane, he could scarcely have felt more. In the moment's confused blow, he almost stammered.

"Your successor? Here?"

"My successor in the practice. I have sold him the good-will, and he has come down to be introduced."

Dr. Rane bowed. The new doctor put out his hand. That same day Dr. Rane went over to Mr. Alexander's and reproached him.

"You might at least have given me the refusal had you wanted to sell it."

"My good fellow, I promised it to Seeley ages ago," was the answer. "He knew I had a prospect of the London appointment: in fact, helped me to get it."

What was to be said? Nothing. But

Oliver Rane felt as though a bitter blow had again fallen upon him, blighting the fair vista of the future.

"Don't be down-hearted, Oliver," whispered Bessy, hopefully, as she clung around him when he went in and spoke of the disappointment. "We shall be just as happy with a small practice as a large one. It will all come right—with God's blessing on us."

But Oliver Rane, looking back on a certain deed of the past, felt by no means sure in his heart of hearts that the blessing would be upon them.

PART THE SECOND.

CHAPTER XIV.

OF WHAT WAS, AND OF WHAT MIGHT BE.

BESSY RANE sat at the large window of her dining-room in the coming twilight. Some twelve months had elapsed since her marriage, and summer was round again. Her work had dropped on her lap : it was that of stitching some wristbands for her husband : and she sat inhaling the fresh sweet scent of the garden flowers, and watching Jelly's movements in the dining room facing her—Mrs. Cumberland's. Jelly had a candle in her hand, apparently searching for something, for she was throwing its light and her own eyes into every hole and corner. Bessy stooped forward to pluck a sprig of sweet verbena, and sat on tranquilly.

At the table behind her sat Dr. Rane, writing as fast as the decreasing light would allow. Some unusual and peculiar symptoms had manifested themselves in a patient he had been recently attending, and he was making them and the case into a paper for a medical publication, in the hope that it would bring him back a remunerating guinea or two.

"Oliver, I am sure you can't see," said Bessy presently, looking round.

"It is almost blindman's holiday, dear. Will you ring for the lamp?"

Mrs. Rane rose. But, instead of ringing for the lamp, she went up to him, and put her hand on his shoulder persuasively.

"Take a quarter of an hour's rest, Oliver. You will find all the benefit of it; and it is not quite time to light the lamp. Let us take a stroll in the garden."

"You are obstructing what little light is left, Bessy; standing between me and the window."

"Of course I am. I'm doing it on purpose. Come! You ought to know a great deal better than I do that it is bad to try the eyes, sir. *Please, Oliver!*"

Yielding to her entreaties, he pushed the

paper from him with a sigh of weariness, and they stepped from the window into the garden. Bessy passed her hand within his arm ; and, turning towards the more covert paths, they began to converse with one another in a semi-whisper.

Many a twilight half-hour had they thus paced together of late, talking together of what was and of what might be. The first year of their marriage had not been one of success in a pecuniary point of view ; for Dr. Rane's practice improved not. He earned barely enough for their moderate wants. Bessy, the cash-keeper, had a difficulty in making both ends meet. But the fact was not known ; never a syllable of it transpired from either of them. Dr. Rane was seen out and about a great deal, going to and fro among his patients ; and the world did not suspect his returns were so poor.

The new surgeon, Seeley, had stepped into all Mr. Alexander's practice, and was flourishing. Dr. Rane's, as before, was chiefly confined to the lower classes, especially those belonging to the North Works ; and, from certain circumstances, these men were not so full of funds as they had been, and conse-

quently not so well able to pay him. That Dr. Rane was bitterly mortified at not getting on better, for his wife's sake as well as his own, could not be mistaken. Bessy preached of hope cheerfully ; of a bright future in store yet ; but he had lost faith in it.

It seemed to Dr. Rane that everything was a failure. The medical book he had been engaged upon in persevering industry at the time of his marriage, from which he had anticipated great things both in fame and fortune, had not met with success. He had succeeded in getting it published ; but as yet there were no returns. He had sacrificed a sum of money towards its publication ; not a very large sum, it's true, but larger than they could afford, and nobody but themselves knew how it had crippled them. Bessy said it would come back some day with plenty of interest ; they had only to keep up a good heart and live frugally.

Poor Bessy herself had one grief that she never spoke of, even to him—the lack of offspring. There had been no prospect of it whatever ; and she so loved children ! As week after week, month after month went by without bringing sign, her disappointment was very keen. She was beginning to get a

- little reconciled to it now ; and grew only the more devoted to her husband.

Mrs. Rane was an excellent manager in the household, spending the smallest fraction that she could, consistent with comfort. It had not yet come to the lack of *that*. At the turn of the previous winter old Phillis became ill and had to leave ; and Bessy had since kept only Molly Green. By a fortunate chance Molly understood cooking ; she had grown to be a really excellent servant. At the small rate of expense they lived at now, Dr. Rane might perhaps have managed to continue to meet it while he waited patiently for better luck ; but he did not intend to do anything of the kind. His only anxiety was to remove to another place, as far away as might be from Dallory Ham.

Whether this thirst for migration would have arisen had his practice been successful, cannot be told. We can only relate things as they were. With the disappointment—and other matters—lying upon him, the getting away from Dallory had grown into a wild, burning desire, that never quitted him by night or by day. That one fatal mistake of his life seemed to hang over him like a curse.

It's true that when he penned the letter so disastrous in its result, he had no more intention in his heart of slaying or killing than had the paper he wrote on ; he had only thought of putting Alexander into disfavour at Dallory Hall ; but it had turned out as it had turned out, and Dr. Rane felt that he had a life to answer for. He might have borne this ; and at any rate his running away from Dallory would neither lessen the heart's burden nor add to it ; but what he could not bear was the prospect of detection. Not a day passed but he saw somebody or another whose face tacitly reminded him that such discovery might take place. He felt sure that Mrs. Gass suspected him still of having written the letter ; he knew that his mother doubted it ; he picked up a half suspicion of Jelly ; he had more than half a one of Richard North ; and how many others there might be he knew not. Ever since the time when he returned from his marriage trip, he thought there had been an involuntary constraint in Richard's manner to him ; it could not be his fancy. As to Jelly, the way he sometimes caught her green eyes observing him, was enough to give the

shivers to a nervous man, which Dr. Rane was not. How he could have committed the fatal mistake of putting that copy—or semi-copy—of the miserable letter into his pocket-book, he never knew. He had tried his writing and his words on two or three pieces of paper, but he surely thought he had torn all up and burnt the pieces. Over and over again, looking back upon his carelessness, he said to himself that it was Fate. Not carelessness, in one sense of the word. Carelessness if you will, but a carelessness that he could not go from in the arbitrary dominion of Fate. Fate had been controlling him with her iron hand, to bring his crime home to him ; and he could not escape it. Whatever it might have been, however ; Fate, or want of caution ; it had led to his being a suspected man by some few around him : and continue to live amidst them he would not. Dr. Rane was a proud-natured man, liking in an especial degree to stand well in the estimation of his fellow creatures ; to have such a degradation as this brought publicly home to him would go well nigh to kill him with shame. Rather than face it he would have run away to the remotest quarter of the habitable globe.

And he had quite imbued Bessy with the wish for change. She but thought as he thought. Never suspecting the true cause of his wish to get away and establish himself elsewhere, she only saw how real it was. Of this they talked, night after night, pacing the garden paths. "There seems to have been a spell of ill-luck attending me ever since I settled in this place," he would say to her; "and I know it won't be lifted off while I stop." He was saying it on this very night.

"I hate the place, Bessy," he observed, looking up at the bright evening star that began to show itself in the clear blue sky. "But for my mother and you I should never have stayed in it. I wish I had the money to buy a practice elsewhere. As it is, I must establish one."

"Yes," acquiesced Bessy. "But where? The great thing is—what other place to fix upon."

Of course that was the chief thing. Dr. Rane looked down and kept silence, pondering various matters in his mind. He thought it had better be London. A friend of his, one Dr. Jones, who had been a fellow-student in their student-days, was doing a large practice

as a medical man in the neighbourhood of New York : he wanted assistance, and had proposed to Dr. Rane to go over and join him. Nothing in the world would Dr. Rane have liked better ; and Bessy was willing to go where he went, even to quit her native land for good ; but Dr. Jones did not offer this without an equivalent, and the terms he named to be paid down, £500, were entirely beyond the reach of Oliver Rane. So he supposed it must be London. With the two hundred pounds that he hoped to get for the good-will of his own practice in Dallory Ham —at this very moment he was trying to negotiate with a gentleman for it in private—he should set up in London, or else purchase a small share in an established practice. Anything, anywhere, to get away, and to leave the nightmare of daily-dreaded discovery behind him !

“ Once we are away from this place, Bessy, we shall get on. I feel sure of it. You won’t long have to live like a hermit, from dread of the cost of entertaining company, or to look at every sixpence before you lay it out.”

“ I don’t mind it, Oliver. You know how

sorry I should be if you thought of giving up our home here for my sake."

"But I don't ; it's for my own as well," he hastily added. "You can't realize what it is, Bessy, for a clever medical man—and I am that—to be beaten back ever into obscurity ; to find no field for his talents ; to watch others of his generation rise into note and usefulness. I have not got on here ; Madam has schemed to prevent it. Why she should have pushed on Alexander ; why she should push Seeley ; not for their sakes, but to oppose me, I have never been able to imagine. Unless it was that my mother, when Fanny Gass, and Mr. North were intimate as brother and sister in early life."

"And Madam despises the Gass family, and ours equally. It was a black-letter day for us all when papa married her."

"It is no reason why she should have set her face against *me*. It has been a fatal blight on me : worse than you and the world think for, Bessy."

"I am sure you must have felt it so," murmured Bessy. "And she would have stopped our marriage if she could."

"Whoever succeeds me here will speedily

make a good practice of it. You'll see. She has kept me from doing it. There's one blessed thing—her evil influence cannot follow us elsewhere."

"I should like to become rich and have a large house, and get poor papa to live with us," said Bessy hopefully. "Madam is worrying him into his grave with her cruel temper. Oh, Oliver, I should like him to come!"

"I'm sure I'd not object," replied Dr. Rane good-naturedly. "How they will keep up the expenses at Dallory Hall if this strike be prolonged, I cannot think. Serve Madam right!"

"Do you hear much of the trouble, Oliver?"

"Much of it! Why, I hear nothing else. The men are fools. They'll cut their own throats as sure as a gun. Your brother Richard sees it coming."

"Sees what?" asked Bessy, not exactly understanding.

"Ruin," emphatically replied Dr. Rane. "The men will play at bo-peep with reason until the trade has left them. Fools! Fools!"

"It's not the poor men, Oliver. I have lived amongst them, some of them at any

rate, since I was a child, and I don't like to hear them blamed. It is that they are misled. Misled by the trades' unions."

"Nonsense!" replied Dr. Rane. "A man who has his living to earn ought not to allow himself to be misled. There's his work to hand; let him do it. A body of would-be autocrats might come down on me and say 'Oliver Rane, we want you to join our society: which forbids doctors to visit patients except under its own rules and regulations.' Suppose I listened to them?—and stayed at home, and let Seeley, or anybody else who would, snap up my practice, and awoke presently to find my means of living irrevocably gone?—nothing left for me but the workhouse? Should I deserve pity? Certainly not."

Bessy laughed a little. They were going in, and she—still keeping her hand within his arm—coaxed him yet for another minute's recreation into the drawing-room. Sitting down to the piano in the fading-light—the piano that Richard had given her—she began a song that her husband was fond of, "O Bay of Dublin." That sweet song set to the air of "Groves of Blarney," by the late Lady Dufferin. Bessy's voice was weak and of no

compass, but true and rather sweet ; and she had that, by no means common, gift of rendering every word as distinctly heard as though it were spoken : so that her singing was pleasant to listen to. Her husband liked it. He leaned against the window-frame, now as she sang, in a deep reverie, gazing out on Dallory Ham, and at the man lighting the road-side lamps. Dr. Rane never heard this song but he wished he was the emigrant singing it, with some wide ocean flowing between him and home.

“ What’s this, I wonder ? ”

Some woman, whom he did not recognize, had turned in at his gate and was ringing the door-bell. Dr. Rane found he was called out to a patient: one of the profitless people as usual.

“ Piersons’ want me, Bessy,” he looked into the room to say. “ The man’s worse. I shall not be long.”

And Bessy rose when she heard the street-door closed.

Taking a clean duster from a drawer, she carefully passed it over the keys before closing her piano for the night. Very much did Bessy cherish her drawing-room and its furni-

ture. They did not use it much : not from fear of spoiling it, but because the other room with its large bay window seemed the most cheery ; and people feel more at ease in the room they commonly sit in. Bessy took pride in her house as though it had been one of the grandest in all Dallory : happy as a queen in it, felt she. Stepping lightly over the drawing-room carpet—fresh as the day when it came out of Turtle's warehouse—touching, with a gentle finger, some pretty thing or other on the tables as she passed, she opened the door and called to the servant.

“Molly, it is time these shutters were shut.”

Molly Green, in a bit of a cap tilted on her hair behind, and a white muslin-apron, came out of the kitchen hard by. Molly liked to be as smart as the best of them, although she had the whole work to do. Which whole was not very much, when aided by her mistress's help and good-management.

“You had better light the hall-lamp,” added Mrs. Rane, as she went up stairs.

It was tolerably light yet. Bessy often did what she was about to do—namely, draw down the window-blinds ; it saved Molly the trouble. The wide landing was less bare than

it used to be ; at the time of Dr. Rane's marriage he had covered it with some green drugget, and put a chair and a book-shelf there. It still looked too large, still presented a contrast with the luxuriously furnished landing of Mrs. Cumberland's opposite, especially when the two wide windows happened to be open ; but Bessy thought her own good enough. Of the two back rooms, one had been furnished as a spare bed-chamber ; the other had not much in it beside Bessy's boxes that had come from the Hall. Richard had spoken kindly to her about this last chamber. "Should any contingency arise ; sickness, or else ; that you should require its use, Bessy," he said, "and Rane not find it quite convenient to spare money for furniture, let me know, and I'll do it for you." She had thanked him gratefully : but the contingency had not come yet.

Into this back room first went Bessy, passed by her boxes, closed the window, and drew the white blind down. From thence into the chamber by its side—a pretty room, with chintz curtains to the window and the Arabian bed. Dr. Rane was very particular about having plenty of air in his house, and would have every window open all day long. Next,

Bessy crossed the landing back again to her own chamber. She had to pass through the drab room (as may be remembered) to get to it. The drab room was just in the same state that it used to be ; its floor bare, Dr. Rane's glass jars and other articles used in chemistry lying on one side it. Formerly they were strewed about any where : under Bessy's neat rule, they were gathered together into a small space. Sometimes Bessy thought she should like to make this her own sitting and work-room : its window looked to the fields beyond Dallory Ham. Often, when she first came to the house, she would softly say to her secret heart, "What a nice day-nursery it would make !" She had left off saying it now.

Taking some work from a drawer in her own room, which was what she went up for —for she knew that Oliver would tell her to leave off if she attempted to stitch the wrist-bands by candle-light—she stood for a minute at the window and saw some gentleman, whom she did not recognise, turn out of Mr. Seeley's, and go towards Dallory.

"A fresh patient," she thought to herself, with a sigh very like envy. . "He gets them all. I wish a few would come to Oliver."

As she watched the stranger up the road, something in his height and make put her in sudden mind of her dead brother, Edmund. All her thoughts went back to the unhappy time of his death, and to the letter that had led to it.

"It's very good of Oliver to comfort me, saying he could not in any case have lived long—and I suppose it was so," murmured Bessy; "but that does not make it any the less shocking. He was killed. Cut off without warning by that anonymous, wicked letter. And I don't believe the writer will be ever traced now: even Richard seems to have cooled in the pursuit, since he discovered it was not the man he had suspected."

Close upon the return of Dr. and Mrs. Rane after their marriage, the tall thin stranger who had been seen with Timothy Wilks the night before the anonymous letter was sent, and whom Richard North and others fully believed to have been the writer, was discovered. It proved to be a poor artist, travelling the country to take sketches—who was sometimes rather too fond of being a boon companion with whatever company he might happen to fall into. Hovering here for some

days, hovering there, all in pursuit of his calling, he at length made his head quarters at Whitborough. Hearing he was suspected, he came voluntarily forward, and convinced Richard North that he at least had had nothing to do with the letter. Richard's answer was, that he fully believed him. And perhaps it was Richard North's manner at this time, coupled with a remark he made to the effect that "it might be better to allow all speculation on the point to rest," that first gave Dr. Rane the idea of Richard's suspicion of himself. Things had been left at rest since : and even Bessy, as we see, thought her brother was growing cool.

Turning from the window with a sigh, given to the memory of her dead brother, she passed through the ante-room to the landing on her way downstairs. Mrs. Cumberland's landing opposite gave forth a brilliant light as usual —for that lady liked to burn plenty of lamps in her hall and staircases—and Ann, the housemaid, was drawing down the window blind. Mrs. Rane's window had never had a blind.

Molly Green was taking the supper-tray into the dining-room when she got down.

Bessy hovered about it, seeing that things were as her husband liked them. She put his slippers ready, she drew his arm-chair forward ; ever solicitous for his comfort. To wait on him and make things pleasant for him was the great happiness of her life. After that she sat down and worked by lamp-light, awaiting his return.

While Dr. Rane, walking forth to see his patient and walking home again, was buried in an unpleasant reverie, like a man in a dream. That one dreadful mistake lay always with heavier weight upon him at the solitary evening hour. Now and again, he would almost fancy he should see Edmund North looking out at him from the road-side hedges or behind trees. At any sacrifice he must get away from the place, and then perhaps a chance of peace might come : at least from this ever-haunting dread of discovery. He would willingly give the half of his remaining life, to undo that past dark night's work.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. GASS AMID THE WORKMEN.

THERE was trouble amidst the Dallory work-people. It had been looming for some time before it came. No works throughout the kingdom had been more successfully carried on than the North Works. The men were well paid ; peace and satisfaction had always reigned between them and their employers. But when some delegates, or emissaries, or whatever they may please to call themselves, arrived stealthily at Dallory from the Trades' Unions, and took up their stealthy abode in the place, and whispered their stealthy whispers into the ears of the men, the peace was over.

It matters not to trace the working of these insidious whispers, or how the poison spread. Others have done it far more effectively and to the purpose than I could.

Sufficient to say that the Dallory workpeople caught the infection prevailing amidst other bodies of men—which the public, to its cost, has of late years known too much of—and they joined the ranks of the disaffected. First there had been doubt, and misgiving, and wavering ; then agitation ; then dissatisfaction ; then parleying with their master, Richard North ; then *demands* to be paid more and do less work. In vain Richard, with his strong good sense, argued and reasoned : showing them, in all kindness, not in anger, how mistaken was the course they were entering on, and what must come of it. They listened to him with respect, for he was liked and esteemed ; but they would not give in a jot. It had been told privately to Richard that much argument and holding-out had been carried on with the Trades' Union emissaries, some of whom were ever hovering over Dallory like birds of prey : the workmen wanting to insist on the sound sense of Richard North's views of things, the others speciously disproving. But it came to nothing. The workmen yielded to their despotic lords and rulers just as submissively as others have done, and Richard's words were

set at nought. They were like so many tame sheep following blindly their leader. The agitation, beginning about the time of Bessy North's marriage, continued for many months ; it then came to an issue ; and for several weeks now the works had been shut up.

For the men had struck. North and Gass had valuable contracts on hand, and they could not be completed. Unless matters took a turn speedily, masters and men would alike be ruined. The ruin of the first involved that of the last.

Mrs. Gass took things more equably than Richard North. In one sense she had less cause to take them otherwise. Her prosperity did not depend on the works. A large sum of hers was certainly invested in them ; but a larger one was in other securities safe and sure. If the works and their capital went to nought, the only difference it would make to Mrs. Gass was, that she should have so much the less money to leave behind her when she died. In this sense therefore Mrs. Gass could take things calmly : but in regard to the men's conduct she was far more outspoken and severe than Richard.

Dallory presented a curious scene. In former days, during work time not an idle man was to be met : the village street, the various outlets, had looked almost deserted, save for the playing children. Now the narrow thoroughfares were blocked up with groups of men ; talking seriously, or chaffing with each other, as might be ; most of them smoking and spitting, and all looking utterly sick of the wearily-passing hours. Work does not tire a man—or woman either—half as much as idleness.

At first the holiday was agreeable from its novelty ; the six days were each a Sunday, as well as the seventh ; and the men and women lived in clover. Not one family in twenty had been sufficiently provident to put by money for a rainy day, good though their wages had been ; but the trades' unions took care of their new protégés, and supplied them with funds. But—as the weeks went on, and Richard North gave no sign of relenting—that is, of acceding to his men's demands by taking them on again at their terms—the funds did not come in so liberally. Husbands, not accustomed to be stinted ; wives, not knowing how to make sixpence

suffice for a shilling ; might be excused if they felt a little put out ; and they began to take things to the pawnbroker's. Mr. Ducket, the respectable functionary who presided over the interests of the three gilt balls at Dallory, rubbed his hands complacently as he took the articles in. Being gifted with a long sharp nose, his scent was keen, and he smelt the good time coming.

One day, in passing the shop, Mrs. Gass saw three women in it. She walked in herself ; and, with scant ceremony, demanded what they were pledging. The women slunk away, hiding their property under their aprons, and leaving their errand to be completed another time. That Mrs. Gass or their master, Richard North, should see them at this work, brought humiliation to their minds and shame to their cheeks. Richard North and Mrs. Gass had both told them (to their intense disbelief) that it would come to this : and to be detected in the actual fact of pledging, seemed very like a tacit defeat.

“ So you've began, have you, Ducket ? ” commenced Mrs. Gass.

“ Began what, ma'am ? ” asked Ducket ; a little, middle-aged man with watery eyes and

weak hair ; always deferent in manner to the wealthy and fine Mrs. Gass.

"Began what ! Why, the spouting. I told 'em all they'd come to the pawn-shop."

"It's them that have begun the spouting, ma'am ; not me."

"Where do you suppose it will end, Ducket ?"

Ducket shook his head meekly, intimating that he couldn't suppose. He was naturally meek in disposition, and the brow-beating he habitually underwent in the course of business from his customers of the fairer sex had tended to subdue his spirit and make him mild as honey.

"It 'll just end in their pawning every earthly thing their home has got inside of 'em, leaving them to the four naked walls," said Mrs. Gass. "And the next move 'll be into the work 'us."

In the presence of Mrs. Gass, Ducket did not choose to show any sense of latent profit this wholesale pledging might bring to him. On the contrary, he affected to see nothing but gloom.

"A nice prospect for us rate-payers, ma'am, that 'ud be ! Taxes be heavy enough, as it

is, in Dallory parish, without having all these workmen and their families throw'd on us to eat us up."

"If the taxes was of my mind, Ducket, they'd let the men starve, rather than help 'em. When strong, able-bodied artizans have got plenty of work to do, and won't do it, it's time for them to be taught a lesson. As sure as you be standing on that side your counter, and me on this, them misbeguided men will come to want a mouldy crust."

"Well, I'd not wish 'em as bad as that," said Ducket, who, apart from the hardness induced by his trade, was rather soft-hearted. "Perhaps Mr. Richard North 'll give in."

"Mr. Richard North give in!" echoed Mrs. Gass. "Don't you upset your brains with perhapsing that, Ducket. Who ought to give in—looking at the rights and wrongs of the question—North and Gass, or the men? Tell me that."

"Well, I think the men are wrong," acknowledged the pawnbroker, smoothing down his coarse white linen apron. "And foolish too."

Mrs. Gass nodded several times, a significant look on her pleasant-natured face. She

wore a top-knot of white feathers, and they bowed majestically with the movement.

" Maybe they'll live to see it, too. They will, unless their senses come back to 'em pretty quick. Look here, Ducket: what I was about to say is this—don't be too free to take their traps in."

Ducket's face assumed a rueful cast, but Mrs. Gass was looking at him, evidently waiting for an answer.

" I don't see my way clear for refusing of things when they be brought to me, Mrs. Gass, ma'am. The women 'ud only go off to Whitborough and pledge 'em there."

" Then they should go—for me."

" Yes, ma'am," rejoined the man, not knowing what else to say.

" I'm not particular squeamish, Ducket: trade's trade; and a pawnbroker must live as well as other people. I don't say but what the money he lends does sometimes a world of good to them that's got no other help to turn to—and, may be, through no fault of their own, poor things. But when it comes to the dismantling of homes by the dozen and the score, and the leaving of families as naked and destitute as ever they were when they

came into this blessed world, that's different. And I'd not like to have it on my conscience, Ducket, though I was ten pawnbrokers."

Mrs. Gass quitted the shop with the last words, leaving Ducket to digest them. In passing North Inlet, she saw a group of the disaffected collected together, and turned out of her way to speak to them. Mrs. Gass was entirely at home, so to say, with every one of the men at the works ; more so, perhaps, than a lady of better birth and breeding could ever have been. She found fault with them, and commented on their failings as familiarly as though she had been one of themselves. Of the whole body of workpeople, not more than three or four had consistently raised their voices against the strike. These few would willingly have gone to work again, and thought it a terrible hardship that they could not : but of course the refusal of the many to return practically closed the gates on all. Richard North could not keep his business going with only half-a-dozen pairs of hands in it.

" Well," began Mrs. Gass, " what's the time o' day with you men ?"

The men parted at the address, and touched

their caps. The “time o’ day” meant, as they knew, anything but the literal question.

“How much longer do you intend to lead the lives of gentlefolk?”

“It’s what we was a talking on, ma’am—how much longer Mr. Richard North ’ll keep the gates closed again us,” returned one, whose name was Webb, speaking boldly but respectfully.

“Don’t you put the saddle on the wrong horse, Webb; I told you that, the other day. Mr. Richard North didn’t close the gates again you: you closed ‘em again yourselves by walking out. He’d open them to you tomorrow, and be glad to do it.”

“Yes, ma’am, but on the old terms,” debated the man, looking obstinately at Mrs. Gass.

“What have you to say again the old terms?” demanded that lady of the men collectively. “Haven’t they kept you and your families in comfort for years and years? Where was your grumblings then?—I heard of none.”

“But things is changed,” said Webb.

“Not a bit of it,” retorted Mrs. Gass. “It’s you men that have changed; not the things.

I'll put a question to you, Webb—to all of you—and it won't do you no harm to answer it. If these trade union men had never come among you with their persuasions and their doctrines, should you, or should you not, have been at your work now in content and peace? Come, Webb, be honest, and say."

"I suppose so," confessed Webb.

"You know so," corrected Mrs. Gass. "It is as Mr. Richard said the other day to me—the men are led away by a chimera, which means a false fancy, Webb; a sham. There's the place"—pointing in the direction of the works—"and there's your work, waiting for you to do it. Mr. Richard will give you the same wages that he has always gave; you say you won't go to work unless he gives more: which he can't afford to do. And there it rests: you, and him, and the business, all at a standstill."

"And likely to be at a standstill, ma'am," returned Webb, but always respectfully.

"Very well; let's take it at that," said Mrs. Gass, with equanimity. "Let's take it that it *lasts*, this state o' things. What's to come of it?"

Webb, an intelligent man and superior work-

man, looked out straight before him thoughtfully, as if seeking a solution to the question. Mrs. Gass, finding he did not answer, resumed :

“ If the Trades’ Unions can find you permanent in food, and drink, and clothes, and firing, well and good. Let ‘em do it: there’d be no more to say. But if they can’t ? ”

“ They undertake to keep us as long as the masters hold out.”

“ And the money—where’s it had from ? ”

“ Subscribed. All the working bodies throughout the United Kingdom subscribe to support the Trades’ Unions, ma’am.”

“ I heard,” said Mrs. Gass, “ that you were not getting quite as liberal a keep from the Trades’ Unions as they gave you to begin upon.”

“ That’s true,” interrupted one named Foster, who very much resented the shortening of the supplies.

Mrs. Gass gave a toss to her lace parasol. “ I heard, too—I’ve seen, for the matter of that—that your wives had begun to spout their spare crockery,” said she. “ What ’ll you do when the allowance gets less and less till it comes to nothing, and *all* your things is at the pawnshop ? ”

One or two of them laughed slightly. Not at her figures of speech—the homely language was their own—but at the improbability of the picture she called up. It was a state of affairs not possible to arise, they answered, while they had the Trades' Unions at their backs.

“Isn’t it,” said Mrs. Gass. “Them that live longest ’ll see most. There’s strikes agate all over the country. You know that, my men.”

Of course the men knew it. But for the nearly universal example set by others, they might never have struck themselves.

“Very good,” said Mrs. Gass. “Now look you here. You can see out before you just as well as I can, you men; you’ve got your senses as sharp as I’ve got mine. When the whole country, pretty nigh, gets on the strike, where are the subscriptions to come from for the Trades’ Unions? Don’t it stand to common reason that there’ll be nobody to pay ’em? Who’ll keep you then?”

It was the very thing wanted—that all the country should be on strike; for then the masters must give in, was the reply given.

And then the men stood their ground and looked at her.

Mrs. Gass shook her head; the feathers waved. She supposed it must be as Richard North had said—that the men in their prejudice really could not foresee what might be looming in the future.

"It seems no good my talking," she resumed; "I've said it before. If you don't come to repent, my name's not Mary Gass. I'm far from wishing it; goodness knows that; and I shall be heart-sick sorry for your wives and children when the misery comes upon 'em. Not for *you*; because you are bringing it on deliberate."

"Ma'am, we don't doubt your good wishes for us and our families generally," spoke Webb. "But, if you'll please excuse my saying of it, you stand in the shoes of a master, and naturally look on with the masters' sight. Your interests lie that way, ours this, and they be dead opposed to each other."

"Well, now, I'll just say something," cried Mrs. Gass. "As far as my own interest goes, I don't care a jot whether the works go on again, or whether they stand still for ever. I've got as much money as will last me my

time ; if every pound that's locked up in the works is lost, it'll make no sort of difference to me, or my home, or my comforts—and you ought to know this of yourselves. I shall have as much to leave behind me, too, as I care to leave. But, if you come to talk of interests, I tell you whose I do think of, more than I do of mine—and that's yours and Mr. Richard North's. I am as easy on the matter, on my own score, as a body can be ; but I'm not on yours or his."

It was spoken with single-minded earnestness. In fact Mrs. Gass was incapable of attempting deceit or sophistry—and the men knew it. But they thought that, in spite of her honesty, she could but be prejudiced for the opposition cause ; and consequently her words held no more weight with them than the idle wind.

" Well, I'm off," said Mrs. Gass. " I hope with all my heart that your senses will come to you. And I say it for your sakes."

" They've not left us—that we knows on," grumbled a man in a suppressed and half-insolent tone, as if he were dissatisfied with things in general.

" I hear you, Jack Allen. If you men think

you know your own business best, you must follow it," concluded Mrs. Gass. "The old saying runs, A wilful man must have his way. One thing I'd like you to understand : that when your wives and children shall be left without a potater to their mouths or a rag to their backs, you needn't come whining to me to help 'em. Don't you forget to bear that in mind, my men."

Waiting for her at her own home, Mrs. Gass found Richard North. That this was a very anxious time for him, might be detected by the ever-thoughtful look his face wore habitually. It was all very well for Mrs. Gass, so amply provided for, to take the reigning troubles easily ; Richard was less philosophical. And with cause. His own ruin—and the final closing of the works would be nothing less—might be got over. He had his profession, his early manhood, his energies ; his capability and character alike stood high ; he could have no fear of making a living for himself, even though it had to be done in the service of some more fortunate firm, and not in his own. But there was his father. If the works came to a permanent close, the income Mr. North enjoyed from them could no longer

be paid. All Mr. North's resources, whether hitherto derived from them or from Richard's generosity, would vanish like the mists of a summer's morning.

"What's it you, Mr. Richard?" cried Mrs. Gass when she entered, and saw him standing near the window of her dining-room. "I'd not have stopped out if I'd known you were here. Some of them men have been hearing a bit of my mind," she added, sitting down behind the plants and untying her bonnet-strings. "It's come to pawning of the women's best gowns now."

"Has it?" replied Richard North, rather abstractedly, as if he were buried in thought. "Of course it must come to that, sooner or later."

"Sooner or later it 'ud come to the pawn-ing of their skins—an' they were able to strip 'em off," spoke Mrs. Gass. "If this state of things is to last, they'll have nothing else left of 'em to strip."

Richard wheeled round, took a chair in front of Mrs. Gass, and sat down in it. He had come to make a proposition to her; one he did not quite cordially approve of himself; and from that cause his manner was perhaps

a trifle less ready than usual. Richard North had received from Mrs. Gass, at the time of her late husband's death, full power to act on his own responsibility, just as he had held it from Mr. Gass; but in all weighty matters he had made a point of consulting them: Mr. Gass while he lived, Mrs. Gass since.

"It is a question that I have been asking myself a little too often for my peace—how long this state of things will last, and what will be its end," said Richard in answer to her last words, his low tone almost painfully earnest. "The longer it goes on, the worse it will be; for the men and for us."

"That's precisely what I tell 'em," acquiesced Mrs. Gass, tilting back her bonnet and fanning her face with her handkerchief. "But I might just as well speak to so many postesses."

"Yes; talking will not avail. *I* have talked to them; and find it to be only waste of words. If they listen to my arguments and feel inclined to be impressed with them, the influences of the Trades' Union undo it all again. I think we must try something else."

"And what's that, Mr. Richard?"

"Give way a little."

"Give way!" repeated Mrs. Gass, pushing her chair some inches back in her surprise.

"What! give 'em what they want?"

"Certainly not. That is what we could not do. I said give way *a little*."

"Mr. Richard, I never would."

"What I thought of proposing is this : To divide the additional wages they are standing out for. That is, offer them half. If they would not return to work on those terms, on that concession, I should have no hope of them."

"And my opinion is, they'd *not*. Mr. Richard, sir, it's them Trade Union people that upholds 'em in their obstinacy. They'll make 'em hold out, them misleading Unionists, for the whole demands or none. What do the leaders of the Union care? It don't touch their pockets, or their comforts. So long as their own nests be feathered, the working man's may get as bare as boards. Don't you fancy the rulers 'll let our men give way half. It's only by keeping up agitation that agitators live."

"I should like to put it to the test. I have come here to ask you to agree to my doing it."

"And what about the shortening of the time that they want?" questioned Mrs. Gass.

"I should not give way there. It is not practicable. They must return on the usual time: but of the additional wages demanded I would offer half. Will you assent to this?"

"It will be with an uncommon bad grace," was Mrs. Gass's answer.

"I see nothing else that can be done," said Richard North. "If only as a matter of conscience I should wish to propose it. When it ends in a comprehensive ruin—which seems only too certain, for we cannot shut our eyes to what is being enacted all over the country in almost all trades—and the women and children come to lie under our very eyes here, famished and naked, I shall have the consolation of knowing that it is the men's own fault, not mine. Perhaps they will accept this offer: I hope so, though it will leave us but little profit. If we can only make both ends meet, just to keep us going during these unsettled times, we must be satisfied. I am sure I shall be doing right, Mrs. Gass, to make this proposal."

"Mr. Richard, sir, you know that I've trusted to your judgment always, and shall

trust it to the end ; anything you thought well to do, I should never dissuade from. You shall make this offer if you please : but I know you'll be opening for the men a loophole. Give 'em an inch, and they'll want to take an ell."

"If they come back it will be a great thing," argued Richard. "The sight of the works standing still ; the knowledge that all else involved is standing still, almost paralyses me."

"Don't you go and take it to heart at the beginning now," affectionately advised Mrs. Gass. "There's not much damage done yet."

Richard bent forward, a painful earnestness on his face. "It is of my father that I think. What will become of him if all our means are stopped ?"

"I'll take care of him till better times come round," said Mrs. Gass, heartily. "And of you, too, Mr. Richard ; if you won't be too proud to let me, sir."

Richard laughed ; a slight, genial laugh ; partly in amusement, partly in gratitude. "I hope the better times will come at once," he said, preparing to leave. "At least, sufficiently good ones to allow of business going

on as usual. If the men refuse this offer of mine, they are made of more ungrateful stuff than I should give them credit for."

"They *will* refuse it," said Mrs. Gass, emphatically. "As is my belief. Not them, Mr. Richard, sir, but the Trades' Unions for 'em. Once get under the thumb of that despotic body, and a workman daredn't say his soul is his own."

And Mrs. Gass's opinion proved to be the correct one. Richard North called his men together, and laid the concession before them ; pressing them to accept it in their mutual interests. The men requested a day for consideration, and then gave their answer : rejection. Unless the whole of their demands were complied with, they unequivocally refused to return to work.

"It will be worse for them than for me in the long run," said Richard North.

And many a thoughtful mind believed that he spoke in a spirit of prophecy.



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